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## Shattering the Glass Slipper: An Investigation Into Nontraditional Gender Roles and Norms in the Elementary Classroom

Sara McLean Suber

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SHATTERING THE GLASS SLIPPER: AN INVESTIGATION INTO  
NONTRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES AND NORMS IN THE ELEMENTARY  
CLASSROOM

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, friends, school family, and dogs.

Throughout my life my family has fostered my desire to be a life-long learner. Although this program was a whirlwind of typing, reading, and researching, the one constant was my parents' strong, yet gentle encouragement and guidance; for this I am beyond thankful. The May before I started the program, I can distinctly remember sitting in a restaurant telling my sister about the presentation USC had conducted at my school explaining the EdD program. The deadline for application was a week away and my sister's immediate reaction was, "Of course you are doing this. Let's go!" Her unwavering confidence in me has never faltered, even when my self-confidence did. My friends have stuck by my side when I could not socialize because of assignments or was grumpy due to writer's block. They knew when I needed a push to keep going, but more importantly, they knew when I needed confirmation that it was alright to stop working for the day. So many parts of this program would have been more difficult without the support of my school family. My principal allowed me to teach in a way that I believe is best for children, my team was always there when I needed to bounce ideas off someone, other teachers in my school shared resources and read alouds with me, and of course, my students were amazing throughout the entire process. Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to the dogs who started this journey with me and the ones who finished it with me. I promise I will have more time for walks now.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative, action research study investigated the ways that third grade students reacted when their worldviews concerning traditional gender roles and norms were challenged through classroom discourse, children's literature, integrated art projects, and other writing and reading activities. The questions guiding this study were: (1) What is the impact of an English Language Arts unit involving texts and activities that depict nontraditional gender roles and norms on third grade students in a Southern, working class, elementary school?, (2) How are students' preconceived notions in relation to gender roles and norms challenged over the course of the implemented curricular unit?, and (3) What are some of the difficulties of implementing a curricular unit that disrupts traditional gender roles and norms in an urban, Southern school? The student-participants for this study were third grade students and the setting was an elementary school located in Columbia, South Carolina. A pre-survey was administered to determine students' preconceived notions regarding gender roles and norms, then a teacher created curricular unit designed to intentionally expose students to nontraditional gender roles and norms was executed, and finally a post-survey was administered to determine the impact of the unit. The data indicated student growth during the four week intervention.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

Over the past ten years I have been an educator in a Southern, public, elementary school classroom. Again and again, I have found myself wondering *why* there is a lack of curriculum involving diverse texts depicting nontraditional gender norms and roles at my school. When teaching in the South Carolina public school system, educators must acknowledge both the mandated state curriculum and see through its limitations, uncertainties, biases, and cultural overtones. We must teach with a lens that recognizes student diversity, which is a part of the public school system that needs to be addressed and embraced. Students should be able to see reflections of themselves in various texts, such as in trade books, videos, posters, textbooks, paintings, and other classrooms resources.

According to Miller, Nolla, Eagly, and Uttal (2018) students routinely have stereotypical views of professional roles regarding gender norms. As a preliminary step to the present study, gender stereotypes were confirmed during interviews conducted in the spring of 2019 with eighteen third grade students using the Views of Nature of Science- Elementary School Version (VNOS-E) interview protocol (Lederman et al., 2001) and the Draw-a-Scientist Test (DAST) (Chambers, 1993). My third grade students' drawings of a scientist doing science included many of the items on the DAST checklist: lab coat, facial hair, eyeglasses, symbols of research and knowledge, technology, male gender only, White, middle-aged, and scientist working indoors.

Seemingly regardless of my efforts to develop curriculum to show scientists and other professionals as people from all walks of life depicting a diverse mix of race, gender, and culture, this stereotypical gendered view remained strong in my elementary classroom (Barman, 1996; Fort & Varney, 1989; Miller et al., 2018). Therefore, in an effort to diversify my curriculum even more and create opportunities for my students to challenge gender stereotypes, I decided to reconceptualize my classroom curriculum and use this endeavor for my dissertation research project. This was done to align my work with the idea that Delpit (1995) espoused when she wrote, “If we are to successfully educate all of our children, we must work to remove the blinders built of stereotypes, monocultural instructional methodologies, ignorances, social distances, biased research, and racism” (p. 125).

If you looked into my third grade classroom during English Language Arts (ELA) time, you would notice it is not much different than many others across the midlands of South Carolina. It would be composed of energetic, eager, majority African-American students, most of whom are excited about learning and willing to try new things. As a teacher in an urban, working class elementary school, I understand the value in responsiveness (Reis, 2007) in relation to my teaching. Organizing the outlook of the year through teaching that is intentionally responsive promotes seeing what is possible and designing the time and space to accommodate this vision. At the end of class one day, I asked my students why they drew male scientists on the DAST. Some of their responses included:

*It's too dangerous of a job for girls.*

*Girls don't like to get messy doing experiments.*

*Boys are better at science.*

*Girls could do it, but boys would like it better.*

*It's mostly guys as scientists in movies.*

*Science is a boy thing, like reading is a girl thing.*

After administering the DAST to my students in the spring of 2019 and analyzing their responses, I determined that they had biased viewpoints in relation to gender roles and norms. I also became more aware that my current curriculum did not address the issue of gender diversity. I decided to respond by seeking ways to enable my students to expand their thinking about gender awareness, gender stereotypes, gender roles, and gender differences for the present study.

### **Background for the Problem of Practice**

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. Stories matter. Many stories matter. ...stories can be used to empower and to humanize. (Adichie, 2009, 12:57)

Adichie's words continue to ring true today, as they did over a decade ago. To influence the way children construct worldviews about gender, we have to give them a broad platform on which to base their beliefs. It is up to us as educators to provide them with multiple stories, to open their eyes to multiple perspectives. We are tasked with the responsibility of teaching children not *what* to think, but instead, *how* to think.

### **Problem of Practice**

The identified problem of practice for this action research study involves my lack of available content-based texts, children's literature, integrated arts projects, and



curricular activities related to empowering my third grade students to grapple with gender diversity during our daily ELA class. My existing, district provided, curricular materials and pedagogical activities reinforced gendered stereotypes and did not promote opportunities for my students to challenge their worldviews regarding traditional gender roles and norms.

### **Purpose of the Study**

There is a three-pronged purpose of the present qualitative action research study. Student-participants include my third grade ELA class at Field Rapids Elementary School (FRES) (pseudonym) in the Midlands of South Carolina. The primary purpose is to implement a four week unit titled “Shattering the Glass Slipper,” which is a teacher designed curriculum unit positioned within the framework of Sonia Nieto's (2019) approach to teaching focused on the sociopolitical context of multicultural education that encourages elementary students to explore their own worldviews and those of others regarding nontraditional gender roles and norms by engaging in various activities. The secondary purpose is to use pre- and post-surveys and semi-structured interviews to convey the students’ changing and/or static perceptions of gender roles and norms. This information leads to the creation of a better curriculum that meets the students’ needs and enables them to think more broadly about gender. The tertiary purpose focuses on how teaching this unit in an urban, Southern, working class elementary school created its own set of challenges. By designing an action plan using the findings in the present study, other third grade teachers at FRES have an ELA curriculum resource to help their students in challenging traditional assumptions about

gender roles and norms and creating opportunities for their students to grapple with gender diversity.

### **The Setting**

The setting for this action research is Field Rapids Elementary School. The school is located in an urban, working class section of the Midlands in South Carolina. Research is conducted in a third grade classroom during the ELA block, which is scheduled from 7:45-9:30 a.m. on a daily basis. Student participants consist of the third grade students placed in my ELA class. The reasoning behind this sample selection is that these are the students I spend the most time with each day.

### **Research Questions**

In an attempt to disrupt my students' current worldviews associated with gender norms and roles, I conducted an intervention based action research within my third grade classroom. The foundation for this research is a curriculum unit designed around children's literature that presents nontraditional gender norms and roles. One research question (RQ) guided the directivity of the action research with two sub-questions (SQ) strengthening study. They are as follows:

**Research Question:** What is the impact of an English Language Arts unit involving texts and activities that depict nontraditional gender roles and norms on third grade students in a Southern, working class, elementary school?

**Sub-Question 1:** How are students' preconceived notions in relation to gender roles and norms challenged over the course of the implemented curricular unit?

**Sub-Question 2:** What are some of the difficulties of implementing a curricular unit that disrupts traditional gender roles and norms in an urban, Southern school?

Selecting these questions highlights the classroom trifecta of curriculum (RQ), students (SQ1), and teacher (SQ2). Even with knowing this research is warranted, teachers who do decide to create spaces within their classrooms where these topics are deliberated find themselves wondering what counts as knowledge, what topics are open for discussion, and what roles teachers should play in the construction of this knowledge (Bender-Slack, 2010; Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000; Hess, 2004). This multiple perspective approach provides a strong platform to anchor the research and fully explore the potential of the subject.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of any research study is designed to provide the “rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and the research questions” (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 12). The foundation of my theoretical framework is shaped by Nieto and Bode’s (2019) focus on multicultural education in the sociopolitical context and further supported by critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978).

When considering the sociopolitical context of multicultural education as it related to the present study, Nieto and Bode (2019) highlighted the importance of “naming the underpinnings of educational structure” (p. 14). When we, as educators, disregard or deny the existence of different belief systems and ideologies within our school communities and curriculum, we are adding to what Tatum (2017) referred to as the “smog in the air” (p. 86). Tatum further described this “smog” saying, “Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in.... if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing the air?”

(p. 86). Knowing my students are breathing the “smog” related to traditional gender roles and norms in their daily school lives, it is imperative I work to combat the effects this can have. If I were to ignore the existence or influence of this “smog” within the sociopolitical setting of my classroom, it would only serve to contradict the reality my students are encountering (Nieto & Bode, 2019). Having a focus on multicultural education in a sociopolitical context is defined by Nieto and Bode (2019) as:

Multicultural education is a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, gender, and sexual orientation, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. Multicultural education permeates the school’s curriculum and instructional strategies as well as interactions among teachers, students, and families and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action (praxis) as the basis for social change, multicultural education promotes democratic principles of social justice. (p. 32)

Taken from this definition are the seven key components of multicultural education. It must be:

- antiracist (more widely accepted as antidiscriminatory)
- basic education
- important for all students
- pervasive in nature

- socially just
- a process
- based in critical pedagogy (p. 32)

Using these components to guide the research and actions in my elementary classroom, I am acknowledging the ideal that if “multicultural education is to make a real difference, working to change society so it is more socially equitable and just must go hand in hand with change in curricula and classroom practices” (Nieto & Bode, 2019, p. 16).

Several other theories supported the framework of this study, such as critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970); this theory was developed by applying critical theory to the field of education. Critical pedagogy coincided with the tenants of multicultural education and exuded the ideal that education’s purpose is to develop a more socially just world (Itin, 1999). Often this approach is considered to be a way of “thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relation of the wider community and society” (Breunig, 2005, p. 109). As it applied to the current study, as an elementary teacher, I have acknowledged that there is “a lack of congruence between the pedagogical theories that are espoused and the actual classroom practices that are employed” (Breunig, 2005, p. 106). By purposefully engaging my classroom community in intentional experiences with the aim and intent of working toward a more socially just world, I can help my students “learn to think critically and positively about their ability to effect change through their actions” (Nieto & Bode, 2019, p. 44).

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) provided additional support for my theoretical framework. This theory offered a basis for my beliefs about how children create their idea of identity, make sense of the world around them, and develop societal norms. Social learning theory implores us to remember that individuals learn from others through observation, imitation, and modeling; furthermore, this theory suggests that “knowing a stereotype does not necessarily mean that one strives to behave in accordance with it” (Bussey & Bandura, 1992, p. 1237). These findings strengthened my belief that the work I am doing in the classroom with gender roles and norms can take root in the minds of my students and impact their thoughts for some time to come. Due to situational exposure, social knowledge, and cognitive development, ideally my students are developing their own standards relating to gender associated conduct.

Finally, sociocultural theory not only stressed the importance of an individual’s interaction with the culture in which they live, but also implied that human learning is a social process (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory also linked the important contributions that society, which in the present study refers to the classroom, makes to individual development (Shaffer, 2009). By drawing on the assumption that children’s development is dependent on the cognitive and communicative functions that relate to participation in activities within a social context, the classroom presented an ideal location for such growth to occur. The close examination of culture, through the lens of gender, depicts a construct that magnifies “not only cognition, but also motivation, modes of interaction, every day practices, and ways of viewing the world and navigating one’s place within it” (Howard, 2010, p. 57).

These theories help guide the research by providing a framework, according to Grant and Osanloo (2014), to act as the foundation, structure, and support for the knowledge gleaned from the study. Nieto and Bode's (2019) theory provided the overall construct for the framework and acts as a touchstone for all steps in the present study. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) directed me as the teacher researcher to notice and name the social constructs of gender norms and identities, and to instigate the formation of a more socially just classroom. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) facilitated the inquiry into disrupting current biases, based on the presumption that these opinions are fluid in nature. Finally, sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) guided the investigation into gender norms and identities and situates the students in a social learning process.

### **Researcher Positionality**

What do you want to be when you grow up? This question is so often asked of young children; I always had my answer ready. It usually rotated among three choices: a zookeeper, a scientist, or Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. Being an elementary teacher was never an option I gave; it simply was not an interest of mine. Growing up certainly I “played school” with my sister and friends, but I do not recall having the role of teacher very often. Not surprisingly, my career path to the classroom took a nontraditional journey through university research labs, summer camps in the Appalachian Mountains, and a decade in the food service industry. However, my love of learning began as a young child and was fostered by many adults along the way.

Ayers (2001) insisted that in the world of education “good teaching is forever pursuing better teaching” (p. 71). He stated:

As long as I live I am under construction, becoming a teacher, learning to teach, practicing the art and craft of teaching.... Teaching as an ethical enterprise goes beyond presenting what already is; it is teaching toward what ought to be.... Students and teachers, then, might find themselves dissatisfied with what, only yesterday, had seemed the natural order of things. At this point, when consciousness links to conduct and upheaval is in the air, teaching becomes a call to freedom. (p. 71)

Knowing that I must be willing to continuously be a work in progress, I realize this profession is not just about teaching, but also about being taught. The openness to accept knowledge and lessons from students, fellow teachers, current research, and proven theories is paramount in this profession. An issue I grapple with in this research is who gets to decide what is important to learn? A teacher must embrace opportunities to teach that extend outside the classroom walls; it is just as much my responsibility to show my students a beautiful winter sunrise as it is to cover all the state standards. The metaphor offered by Riley (2012) resonates with me due to my background in the restaurant industry; is what I am doing in and out of the classroom resulting in *chefs or cooks*? My goal in the present study is to scaffold students into becoming *chefs* who are empowered to create, explore, and decide their own views concerning gender norms and roles, not merely *cooks* who follow a prescribed recipe and maintain the status quo. This must be accomplished while navigating through a curriculum being spoon-fed to us by the state and district regardless of its lack of attention to multicultural education.

Teaching in an urban, working class, elementary classroom affords me the opportunity and the privilege of shaping young minds and hearts. Within this balanced



dichotomy, I truly begin to see my students for who they are, what they mean to my classroom community, and the potential housed within each of them. When educators are living and learning in the moment alongside students, we are doing our part to positively impact the nuanced exploration of elementary education. Given this, my positionality during this research is as a teacher researcher, participant observer, and community insider (Herr & Anderson, 2015). These insider/outsider roles are fluid and can change during various aspects of the research. As the teacher researcher, I took advantage of the changeable vantage points afforded me by my position. I used my tacit knowledge to generate contributions to help shape my students' current worldviews concerning gender. In the role of participant observer during the four week study, I saw things firsthand and used my "knowledge and expertise in interpreting what is observed rather than relying on once-removed accounts" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 139). As a community insider, I learned alongside my students while facilitating discussions about gender roles and identities based on children's literature.

Twelve years into teaching in the elementary setting, I am posed to tackle an issue that has been on the horizon for several years. Herr and Anderson (2015) remind us that "action is influenced by internal convictions" (p. 76). While I know that gender prejudices, biases, and stereotypes need to be discussed with my students, I also recognize these faults in myself. I am not coming to the situation clear of any of these aspects. I bring my own versions of these into the classroom as a Southern, White, straight, Christian female. To address the need to be objective in my collecting, recording, and reporting of data, it is imperative to follow the advice given by Herr and Anderson (2015) that inquiry should be conducted "by or with insiders," not "to or on

them” (p. 3). My students and I created a community that was strengthened by this research, but even when there were disappointments, I could not ignore them in favor of more helpful results. The nature of action research includes an understanding and acceptance of its unpredictability. With action research there can be a tendency on the part of the researcher to “put a positive spin on data” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 44). By noticing and naming these possible perceptions of subjectivity, I hope to diminish their effects within the present research study.

### **Research Design**

This action research followed a qualitative approach, guided by the theory of multicultural education (Nieto & Bode, 2019) and the paradigm of critical research (Efron & Ravid, 2013). This study was designed to investigate the impact of an ELA curriculum unit that purposefully exposed my third grade students to literature, activities, and discussions to address and disrupt their worldviews about traditional gendered roles and norms. This study design also presumed that my students wanted to have a more open-minded view regarding gender roles and norms. The methodological approach of qualitative study was used for this research because it focuses on understanding a phenomenon within the natural setting where it takes place (Erickson, 1986; Holly, Arhar, & Kashten, 2005). Overall, my students strive to be socially just, so the critical research aspect kept the agenda focused on maintaining and improving our social justice outlook. It also gave structure to the design of the research, which is aimed at exposing inequities and bringing about social change (Efron & Ravid, 2013). This social justice focus is supported by the overarching theoretical framework, which was based on Nieto and Bode’s (2019) *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural*

*Education.* This approach to education is defined by seven key components.

Multicultural education must be antiracist, basic education, important for all students, pervasive, education for social justice, a process, and critical pedagogy (p. 32).

Data was collected in various ways throughout the four week timeframe of the study during the Fall 2020 semester to address the research question and sub-questions. As the teacher researcher, I administered pre- and post-intervention surveys, conducted semi-structured interviews, annotated observations, and facilitated classroom discussions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In addition, audio recordings of discussions, teacher lesson plans, and student work artifacts were used as record of classroom investigations (Glesne, 2011).

Analysis occurred to “bring meaning and order to the mass of collected data” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 166). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) highlighted that in qualitative research the collecting and analyzing of data must be continuous and simultaneous. To accomplish this, I used the constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data were coded using the two-step process outlined by Hay (2005) in which I began with basic coding to distinguish overall themes, and then followed with an in depth, interpretive code in which more specific themes and patterns were identified. During this analysis data were organized within the developed coding scheme, which helped reduce the potentially massive amounts of narrative data. Coding was used to identify and differentiate emerging patterns through a grouping process. Connections were established between the coded data and the research question and sub-questions. Data were described in relation to its ability to answer these questions. In the final step of analysis, data were

interpreted on the basis of its connectedness. This interpretation sought to find not only relationships and similarities, but also contradictions (Mertler, 2014).

### **Significance of the Study**

As an educator on the third grade team at an elementary school serving over seven hundred students in 4K through fifth grade, I am an advocate for the implementation of a curriculum component rooted in children's literature depicting nontraditional gender norms and roles. Gender roles are often associated with what society has normalized for what it means to be a girl or boy, woman or man (Martinez & Nash, 1993). Voorhees (1994) formally defined gender roles as "the range of activities, attitudes, and emotions considered socially appropriate for men and women" (p. 23). The gravity of societal definitions and labels concerning gender roles manifests itself in the elementary classroom through the inhibition of students to act on individual passions and strengths that are converse to these preconceived norms (Dresner, 2000). Furthermore, it is important to note that even though research often focuses on the female perspective of such limiting roles, males are impacted by these implications as well (Lehr, 2001; Russell, 2001).

The problem of practice is significant to this educational setting because it addressed a gap in the current curriculum and encourages students to recognize and respond to stereotypes and biases associated with gender as it aids in the construction of their worldviews in connection to nontraditional gender norms and roles. Employing action research to provide an intervention approach to the implications of gender biases allowed the time and space to be created for the close examination of third graders' preconceived notions concerning gender roles and norms and the effectiveness of

teaching into, and then out of, these worldviews using a children's literature foundation. While this present action research was designed to generate knowledge and challenge the assumptions of my students, the focus is relevant in the local setting (Herr & Anderson, 2015). This form of democratic validity allowed for problems to be addressed in context and solutions to be appropriate for that given context (Herr & Anderson, 2015), which in this case was my third grade classroom. While results may or may not be generalizable to other classrooms, they may be transferrable and are actionable for the context.

The school community is composed of approximately 23% White, 69% African-American, 4% Hispanic, and 4% Other according to recent school demographics reports. Working with this population yielded experiences that informed my goal of developing students' understanding of their personal gender stereotypes, and my hope of fostering the growth of new, informed worldviews. I have witnessed the benefits and challenges of teaching through children's literature and addressing the tough topics that can (and should) arise from rich discussions around thoughtful, deliberate exposure to nontraditional ideas. When sharing this outlook with other teachers, some struggled to understand how to execute the framework within the early or elementary classroom. Given the documentation that most new teachers report feeling unprepared to teach children from backgrounds different from their own (Delpit, 2006; 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Long et al., 2006; Nieto, 1999), I know this instruction needs to be clear, accessible, and research based. This made me realize the importance of not only guiding the students, but also the possibility of guiding other teachers through this adventure as well, by documenting the challenges I faced while implementing this curriculum unit.

## **Limitations of Study**

The following limitations were identified and associated with the study focus and research design:

1. The study is limited to one elementary school in Columbia, South Carolina.
2. The study is limited to third grade students.
3. The study is limited to a four week timeframe during the 2020-2021 school year.
4. The study is limited to data collection during an eLearning format due to COVID-19.

While not specifically a limitation to this action research, data from a larger sample of educators and students could provide more generalizable results. A longer time frame for research would allow for a more detailed investigation into the longitudinal implications of the present action research study. An extended research window would also provide the ability to cover other topics mentioned in the definition of multicultural education in the sociopolitical context (Nieto & Bode, 2019) relevant to developing socially just minded students, such as language, socioeconomic status, differing abilities, race, and family composition. Conducting data collection in person as opposed virtually in an eLearning setting might have yielded more in depth discussions.

## **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation in practice includes five comprehensive chapters based on an investigation into the impact of a curriculum unit with intentionally selected texts depicting nontraditional gender norms and roles to provide a framework for altering students' limited worldviews. It also delves into challenges I faced in my role of constructing, scaffolding, and maintaining the opportunities for student growth in the area

of gender identity in a Southern, urban, working class elementary school. Chapter two includes the relevant literature regarding the present action research study categorized by the seven components of multicultural education (Nieto & Bode, 2019, p. 32). Then chapter three not only fleshes out the details of the action research design, but also the implementation and reflection of the children's literature, including interviews, surveys, audio transcripts, students' artifacts, and teacher notes. After that, chapter four focuses on the data and the results. Finally, chapter five includes a review of research findings regarding the use of a teacher designed curriculum unit anchored in a children's literature platform facilitating gender role discussions in a third grade classroom, implications of the study to address the research questions, ideas for future research, and the study's action plan.

### **Glossary of Terms**

This section defines key terms used throughout the study to provide a basis of commonality for readers and researcher alike.

**Bias:** The “attitude, belief, or feeling that results in, and helps to justify, unfair treatment of an individual because of his or her identity” (Derman-Sparks, 1989, p. 3).

**Children's literature:** The collection of work includes any trade or non-text book written for children or young people (Hunt, 1996).

**Discrimination:** Equal access or rights being routinely denied to people based on biases or stereotypes. In the United States our history of inequality, particularly in schools, has perpetuated this issue (Nieto, 2010).

**Hegemony:** The social, cultural, or ideological influences protected by a dominant group (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

**Normalcy:** The state, fact, or condition of being normal or within certain limits that society has defined as acceptable (Davis, 1997).

**Stereotype:** A set idea that all people of a certain culture or group behave or act in a particular, often fixed and oversimplified, way (Ramsey, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

The curricular decisions we make in the classroom matter. There is no shortage of research supporting the notion that there is a direct connection between the literature used in the education setting and actions of students in various situations, such as academics, social play, and relationships (Dougherty & Engel, 1987; Rudman, 1995; Smith et al., 1987). This study purposefully employed lessons that highlight the critical consideration of texts depicting nontraditional gender roles and norms. Another dynamic reason for sharing carefully crafted, diverse literature experiences with children is that it provides “recognition of themselves in the story, a validation of their existence as human beings, an acknowledgment of their value” (Myers, 2014). The truth of this becomes more and more obvious by pursuing a journey into the scholarly literature related to the sociopolitical context of multicultural education with an eye towards curating a less biased classroom in terms of gender roles and norms.



## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

The second chapter of this dissertation in practice focuses on a review of literature related to the impact of multicultural education in a sociopolitical context using the lens of gender norms and roles. In addition to this literature review, the problem of practice, participants, purpose of the study, research questions, and theoretical framework are re-examined to set the stage for the current action research study. Also, in this chapter there is an explanation of the nature of a literature review and an overview of the strategies used for reviewing literature for this study. The scope of the related research literature review is divided into seven sections and follows the key components listed in Nieto and Bode's (2019) definition of multicultural education. The sequence of division for the related research literature topics is as follows:

- Multicultural education is antiracist and antidiscriminatory.
- Multicultural education is basic education.
- Multicultural education is important for all students.
- Multicultural education is pervasive.
- Multicultural education is education for social justice.
- Multicultural education is a process.
- Multicultural education is critical pedagogy. (p. 32)

This chapter's purpose seeks to affirm the significance of the study by positioning it within the context of related research associated with each of the listed aspects of multicultural education. The lens of gender roles and norms is used to more accurately define and guide the literature review. Historical perspectives and links to social justice are embedded within the literature review.

### **Problem of Practice**

The problem of practice for the present study arose from the realization that my current classroom curriculum did not offer students a diverse platform on which to base their worldviews concerning gender roles and norms. The need for this intervention became even more pressing as I started to investigate my students' current definitions of gender roles through the Views of Nature of Science- Elementary School Version interview protocol (Lederman et al., 2001) and the Draw-a-Scientist Test (Chamber, 1993). Supporting a humanistic perspective to the education of children, this pursuit addresses the pertinent, pressing question from Taylor's (2017) Biographic Literacy Profile Project, "What happens when we base instruction upon our observations of children?" (p. 26).

Knowing students could benefit from this action research, I selected the student participants from members of a third grade ELA class in an urban, working class school located in Columbia, South Carolina. To combat this shortcoming in curricular materials, I created a four week investigational unit titled "Shattering the Glass Slipper" focused on purposefully exposing students to various texts depicting nontraditional gender roles and norms; within this unit I also implemented activities and experiences designed to challenge traditional gender views. Children's literature acted as the backbone of the

unit, providing structure for the lessons and giving the students a shared schema in relation to the topic. This decision relies heavily on the finding that read alouds can “often function as the anchor as well as the springboard” (Mills et al., 2004, p. 25) into conversations that might not have happened otherwise. Furthermore, by giving such deliberate thought to these experiences, students have “the chance to discover, without the constant worry about grading and testing” (Strickland & Strickland, 2000, p. 1). The dialogue that evolved through these group interactions further fostered the positive influences of a cooperative, unbiased learning community and supported the sociocultural aspect of the theoretical framework.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present qualitative action research study is trichotomous in nature in accordance with the identified problem of practice for this dissertation in practice. The primary purpose is to implement a teacher-designed curriculum unit that enables elementary students to explore nontraditional gender roles and norms by engaging in various activities, such as interactive read alouds, semi-structured interviews, written reflections, and art projects over the span of four weeks. The secondary purpose is to describe the students’ perceptions of gender roles and norms before and after the implementation of the unit based on pre- and post-surveys. The tertiary purpose is to portray the challenges of implementing a gender diversity unit in an urban, Southern, working class elementary school. Findings are detailed in the present study in order to provide other site-based, elementary level teachers with a curricular, research based resource to help their students challenge traditional assumptions about gender roles and norms.

## **Research Questions**

When constructing research questions associated with the problem of practice, it was necessary to align them with the three major components of classroom instruction: curriculum, students, and teacher. Using a qualitative case study approach, this action research was designed to answer the following set of questions:

**Research Question:** What is the impact of an English Language Arts unit involving texts and activities that depict nontraditional gender roles and norms on third grade students in a Southern, working class, elementary school?

**Sub-Question 1:** How are students' preconceived notions in relation to gender roles and norms challenged over the course of the implemented curricular unit?

**Sub-Question 2:** What are some of the difficulties of implementing a curricular unit that disrupts traditional gender roles and norms in an urban, Southern school?

## **Literature Review Purpose**

Machi and McEvoy (2016) defined a literature review as “a written document that presents a logically argued case founded on a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge about a topic of study” (p. 5). From this definition, the purpose of the literature review can be summarized as an examination of related research that seeks to position the current study within the body of literature already existing on the topic (Mills, 2014). The literature review enables “you to use the insights and discoveries of others whose research came before yours in order to make your research more efficient and effective” (Mertler, 2014, p. 61). The intentional synthesizes of related literature aids in recognizing, shaping, and directing the course of proposed studies (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). The importance of the literature review is further bolstered by Merriam and

Tisdell's (2016) acknowledgement that it is imperative to understand the knowledge base of the field to make a meaningful contribution through further research.

Various search strategies were employed during the examination of related literature. As recommended by Mertler (2014), a search was conducted using electronic databases such as Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Google Scholar, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. The University of South Carolina provides access to several searchable research databases that were used during this process through the A-Z Databases platform. Sources for the literature review were peer reviewed articles or academic journals, published dissertations, textbooks, and scholarly websites. In accordance with the problem of practice, the following key terms were used in combination during database or index searches: children's literature, critical discourse, critical pedagogy, femininities, gender identity, gender boundaries, gender counter stereotyping, gendered discourse, gender equity, gender expectations, gender norms, gender performativity, gender representations, gender roles, gender stereotyping, historical contribution of females, masculinities, multicultural education, school safe spaces, and women's suffrage.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theories help guide the research by providing a framework, according to Grant and Osanloo (2014), to act the foundation, structure, and support for the knowledge gleaned from the study. Freire (1970) stated, "All educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the educator's part. This stance in turn implies- sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly- an interpretation of man and the world" (p. 178). For the present study, Nieto and Bode's (2019) *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of*

*Multicultural Education* provides the overall construct for the framework, which is further strengthened by critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978).

**The sociopolitical context of multicultural education.** The sociopolitical context of our society focuses on “the laws, regulations, policies, practices, traditions, and ideologies” (Nieto & Bode, 2019, p. 3) we encounter as functioning members. The three main goals of multicultural education within the sociopolitical context are promoting equal access to high-quality education, using meaningful learning to raise achievement of all students, and giving students the opportunity to practice the skills needed to be productive members of a democratic society. Four major assumptions must be explained in order to better understand the use of Nieto and Bode’s (2019) text in the theoretical framework:

- There is a connectedness among identity, difference, power, and privilege.
- Many different lenses are needed to properly view multicultural education.
- Teachers are not the villains.
- Public education needs and deserves to be a focus of quality improvements (p. 4-5).

***There is a connectedness among identity, difference, power, and privilege.*** The facets of an individual’s identity influence how a person experiences and interacts with the world. Within the sociopolitical context used in this study, the focus is on gender, but it also includes “race, ethnicity, social class, language use... sexual orientation, religion, ability, and other social and human differences” (Nieto & Bode, 2019, p. 4).

Multicultural education affirms these aspects of identity and seeks to confront constructs

of societal privilege and power. Challenging biases, stereotypes, inequities, and inequalities by critically examining their roles in society helps to leverage the goals of social justice (Nieto & Bode, 2019).

***Many different lenses are needed to properly view multicultural education.*** Due to the connectedness of the first assumption, it stands to reason that a variety of lenses are needed to fully understand multicultural education in the sociopolitical context (Nieto & Bode, 2019). *Affirming Diversity* suggests many of these intended lenses stating that “multicultural education is for *everyone* regardless of ethnicity, race, language, social class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or other differences” (p. 4, emphasis in original). Nieto and Bode (2019) specifically highlighted the inclusion of gender issues in the “multicultural agenda” stating it is “worthy of study and attention” (p. 4).

***Teachers are not the villains.*** Research shows often that educators who are new to the profession feel unprepared to teach a diverse student population, especially when the students’ identity factors differ from their own (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Delpit, 2006; 2012; Long et al., 2006; Nieto, 1999). This does not commonly equate to teachers not caring for students or being solely responsible for a lack in student achievement (Nieto & Bode, 2019). Realizing they “may know very little about the students they teach” and that “their beliefs about students of diverse background may be based in spurious assumptions and stereotypes” (p. 4) are the first steps in avoiding the vilification of the profession. “Action is influenced by internal convictions” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 76); therefore, by confronting this lack of cultural knowledge and seeking ways to maintain a multicultural approach to education enables teachers to overcome their own limited experiences to be more effective with students (Nieto & Bode, 2019).

*Public education needs and deserves to be a focus of quality improvements.* On April 23, 1635, the Boston Latin School opened in the colony of Massachusetts. This is recognized as the first public school in the land that would eventually become the United States of America (Rexine, 1977). Since the inception of the Boston Latin School through almost four centuries, the education of our country's youth has remained a significant, societal institution with the main function of enriching children's lives. Nieto and Bode (2019) refer to the public education system as "worth defending and fighting for" and as "the last and best hope for many young people for a better life" (p. 5). To maintain this reputation, the education system must adapt to the changing times; "change, after all, is only another word for growth, another synonym for learning" (Handy, as cited in Evans, 1996, p. 24).

**Critical pedagogy.** Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) "describes what emerges when critical theory encounters education" (Kincheloe & Steinburg, 1997, p. 24). This theory encourages educators to notice and name the social constructs of gender norms and identities (and other aspects of diversity), and to instigate the formation of a more socially just world (Itin, 1999). Shor (1992) was mentored by Freire for almost two decades and defined critical pedagogy as:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (p. 129)



Critical theorists espouse that education should produce and implement “forms of pedagogy and counter-knowledge that challenge students’ internalized ideologies and subjective identities” (King, 1991, p. 134). Education and knowledge construction are not neutral or apolitical due to their position in historical and cultural contexts (hooks, 1993; Nieto & Bode, 2019). Public school curriculum commonly presents the perspective that is the least controversial. Freire (1985) called this *domesticating education* due its submissive and passive nature. Critical pedagogy, in contrast, encourages students to question the world around them by understanding it from multiple viewpoints. By relying on more than just the dominant groups’ outlook, students can “understand these biases and expose the underlying messages and the power structures that are influencing text and knowledge” (Coste, 2016, p. 2).

**Social learning theory.** Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) is grounded in the idea that people learn from each other using observation, imitation, and modeling. The present study partners this theory with the definition of socialization as the “process by which a person slowly develops a set of values and attitudes, likes and dislikes, goals and purposes, patterns of response and concept of self” (Smith, et al., 1987, p. 401). Using the classroom as a setting for learning and socialization epitomizes Bandura’s (1977) statement:

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do.

Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are

performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. (p. 22)

Bussey and Bandura (1992) further supported the use of this theory in the framework based on their findings that children's opinion and adoption of stereotypes are fluid in nature. The social learning theory facilitates disrupting current gender biases by purposefully challenging students' worldviews based on the presumption that students will learn from each other through observation, the teacher through modeling, and the designed curriculum through imitation. The connotation of inquisition and investigation elicited by the present study employs the concept that "schools must be the labs for learning" (Meier, 1995, p. 177). Knowing that "human differentiation on the basis of gender is a fundamental phenomenon that affects virtually every aspect of people's daily lives" (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 676), educators have to be aware of the important role schools play in transmitting social norms and values in relation to gender through the social learning process (Smiler, 2009).

**Sociocultural theory.** Finally, sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) directs the investigation into gender norms and identities and situates the students in a collaborative, authentic, learning process within the elementary classroom. This theory "serves as a fundamental lens for understanding how culture contributes to learning and the human behavior" (Howard, 2010, p. 56-57). The present study is aligned with this theory based on the notion that children's social, emotional, and cognitive development is more than an isolated, individual process, but instead must be examined in the context of "participation in activities that require cognitive and communicative functions" (Howard, 2010, p. 57). When students are constructing their worldviews related to gender, they are

influenced by external factors; gender is a socially learned behavior (Blaise, 2005). It is the manipulation of these factors that impacts how students navigate the process of meaning making and interpret new knowledge (Howard, 2010). Emphasizing the social factors accompanied by guided learning influences how children think and about what they think (McLeod, 2014).

### **Multicultural Education is Antiracist and Antidiscriminatory**

Nieto and Bode (2019) espoused that “anti-racism, indeed antidiscrimination in general, is at the very core of a multicultural perspective” (p. 32). They point out that different groups have been marginalized and pigeonholed by school curriculum, which showcases historical accounts that not only justify and even celebrate war, colonization, and free enterprise, but also communicate centuries of information from the point of view of rich, Christian, White males (Asante, 1991; Harris, 1992; Zinn, 2005). As classroom educators, we must embody Engebretson’s (2016) notion of “teachers as ‘gatekeepers’ who determine what curriculum is allowed to enter the classroom” (p. 37). Taking this position allows us to monitor and adjust as needed when the current, suggested curriculum needs to be modified or enriched to present a more multicultural, less biased view to our students.

Using the lens of gender to narrow the focus of discrimination through a historical perspective, it is apparent that often the contributions of women were overlooked or downplayed in favor of their male counterparts (Weiler, 2002). “Historically, the exclusion of women from the public sphere has meant that men alone... had the authority to speak for all” (Weiler, 2002, p. 1). On the topic of the women’s suffrage movement, Faderman (1999) postulates that the women leading this (and other equal rights

movements) were often labeled as “manly” or “sexual invert” (p. 315). These labels were derived from the notion that the women were acting outside of the parameters of their socially accepted gender role. Many of these early women’s rights pioneers lead double lives, oscillating between stereotypical and counterstereotypical behaviors to delicately balance their desire for equality while having to maintain an air of inequality to achieve it (Faderman, 1999).

The disparity of society’s acceptance of both genders in political roles, higher education, and certain professions, as well as voting rights, inspired many strong women to find their voices and take a stand in an attempt to “escape the overdetermined narrowness of a female’s existence” (Faderman, 1999, p. 318). To be successful they had to reject stereotypical roles of women to gain ground yet remain in touch with the image of womanhood to be relatable to their targeted audience. This “fascinating historical paradox” (Faderman, 1999, p. 320) is mired with women attempting to reconcile who they were in public with who they were in private, constantly waging an internal battle in which there was no victory. Faderman (1999) explained this juxtaposition saying that some revolutionary females chose to “masquerade as ‘woman’ while thinking and feeling in the fashion that their society had constructed as ‘man’” (p. 320). According to Susan B. Anthony, living this contradictory life meant she was more “fully human” than her counterparts who abided by the socially accepted feminine gender definition of the time (Faderman, 1999, p. 327).

The disproportionally selected and overvalued male perspective is also evident in the recent publication statistics regarding character roles in children’s literature. The overuse of traditional gender roles and the diminishment of gender issues is the focus of

Flood's (2011) research. Flood (2011) presented some staggering statistics to support the claim that there is a gender imbalance in children's literature. One glaring example of this discrimination involves the esteemed Caldecott Medal. The Caldecott Award, named for nineteenth century illustrator Randolph Caldecott, is awarded annually by the American Library Association "to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children published by an American publisher in the United States in English during the preceding year" (Association for Library Service to Children [ALSC], 2009, p. 10). Due to the increased sales and immediate recognition given to award winning books, like those that receive the Caldecott award, they "need to be examined in light of whose knowledge is considered the best and whose lives are being represented in these books" (Albers, 1996, p. 269). Since the Caldecott Medal's initiation in 1938, there is only one decade, the 2010s, in which female main characters (52%) in Caldecott books (honors and winners) outnumber male main characters (48%) (Martinez, Koss, Johnson, Words, & Cautionary, 2016). Other recent decades reflect the predominance of male characters over female characters:

- 1990s- 64% of the main characters were male and 36% were female
- 2000s- 66% of the main characters were male and 34% were female

In addition, Flood (2011) highlights a study of over 6,000 children's books published in the last century that reported "males are central characters in 57% of children's books published each year, with just 31% having female central characters. Male animals are central characters in 23% of books per year, while female animals star in only 7.5%" (para. 2).

Ferguson (2018) released even more current statistics that continue to support the gender inequity in children's literature stating that "...male villains were eight times more likely to appear compared to female villains" (para. 4). Furthermore, Ferguson (2018) reported that speaking opportunities were 50% less likely to be given to female characters than male characters. The impending message this gender disparity is sending to children is that "women and girls occupy a less important role in society than men or boys" (Flood, 2011, para. 1). In addition, the onslaught of imbalance classically conditions the readers to accept stereotypical behaviors, narrowly define gender identities, and expect socially normalized roles concerning interests, abilities, and emotions for both males and females (Fox, 1993). Given this body of statistics relating to children's literature, it is imperative that, as educators, we are mindful of the text we are exposing our students daily in the classroom setting.

Shall we just carelessly allow children to hear any casual tale which may be devised by casual persons, and to receive into their minds ideas for the most part the very opposite of those which we wish them to have when they are grown up? We cannot...anything received into the mind at this age is likely to become indelible and unalterable; and therefore, it is most important that the tales which the young reader first hears should be models of virtuous thoughts.... (Plato, 1991, p. 72)

Considering the importance of the characters that children see in books, Sims Bishop (1990) purported that literature enriches the lives of children by serving as a window, mirror, or sliding glass door. The first part of this metaphor relates to how readers can see a reflection of themselves and their world in the text they read (mirrors).

The intrinsic value of this is that literature then “becomes a means of self affirmation” (Sims Bishop, 1990, p. ix); a validation of their existence in the world. Continuing the explanation, Sims Bishop (1990) offered the notion of books serving as windows through which students see parts of the world that are different than their own. Lastly, books that may be utilized as sliding glass doors when readers “walk through [them] in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author” (Sims Bishop, 1990, p. x). According to Martinez et al. (2016), “the image of moving through sliding glass doors suggests that the reader does not just see a world that is different but engages with that world and is changed by it” (p. 19). Children’s literature presents socially sanctioned gender behaviors, either stereotypically or counterstereotypically, that mold and scaffold young readers’ schema of who they can be now and what their future can be like (Crisp & Knezek, 2010). Children’s literature author Fox (1993) offered the following outlook in response to this topic:

Everything we read constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men. We who write children’s books, and we who teach through literature, need to be sure we are opening doors to full human potential, not closing them. (p. 84)

The importance of teaching with a view aimed at upholding the antidiscrimination aspect of multicultural education is because “it forces teachers and students to take a long, hard look at everything as it was and is, instead of just how we wish it were” (Nieto & Bode, 2019, p. 33). If the materials available are not providing the students with a non-stereotypical, non-biased, antidiscriminatory looks at gender, then the basis from which they are constructing their knowledge is flawed (Marshall, Robeson, & Keefe,

1999). Given the profound impact of the text selected for classroom use, "there can be no doubt that the characters portrayed in children's literature mold a child's conception of socially accepted roles and values, and indicate how males and females are supposed to act" (Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993, p. 220). Curriculum after all, from the very earliest of ages, must have the goal of "forming the mind not just furnishing it" (De Vries & Kohlberg, 1987, p. 17).

### **Multicultural Education is Basic Education**

Often teaching with a multicultural view is considered extra work for teachers or outside of what is required to meet the standards. To purposefully deliberate societal issues, teachers must create the time and space within the classroom to allow students to grapple with tough topics, they have to be confident in what constitutes age-appropriate knowledge, and they have to navigate an often unclear path in the construction of this knowledge (Bender-Slack, 2010; Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000; Hess, 2004).

However, Nieto and Bode (2019) claimed that multicultural education "must be understood as basic to an excellent education" and it "is just as indispensable for living in today's world as reading, writing, arithmetic, and computer literacy" (p. 35). Many other teacher researchers have espoused the integration of gender relevant pedagogy into the basic curriculum. A brief look at some of these teachers' research concerning gender investigations in the classroom further supports the need for the present study.

Hass (2017) spent two years engrossed in a longitudinal study with his students during their second and third grade school years. He tackled not only gender, but also race in his quest to help children grapple with inequities and injustices through critical discourse. He reported his research findings demonstrate that thoughtfully planned



classroom opportunities for critical discourse involving race and gender support students' ability "to observe, question, and critique oppressive social practices enacted upon marginalized communities in the United States" (Hass, 2017, p. vi). Looking forward Hass (2017) plans to use his data to develop new curriculum with the goal of fostering diverse perspectives and relationships within the constructs of basic education subjects, such as mathematics, social studies, science, and language arts. The implications of this research also support the use of the sociocultural theory as part of the framework for the current study. Vygotsky (1978) stressed that learning is a social process, and Hass (2017) detailed how students need others to help them push the boundaries of their own understanding in order to foster growth. Overall, this study highlighted the timely need for elementary teachers to create spaces within their classrooms where students can become part of the informed citizenry by safely questioning their own worldviews, investigating the societal normalization of racial and gender roles, engaging in critical discourse, and unpacking topics concerning dominant versus subordinate cultures (hooks, 1994; Long, Souto-Manning, & Vazquez, 2015).

Further classroom research focuses on the imperativeness of multicultural education as basic education concerning gender roles and norms in the upper elementary grades as well. Flynn (2003) conducted action research in her fifth grade classroom to explore the use of children's literature as a means of affecting her students' gender roles expectations. She details in her findings that quality children's literature depicting nontraditional gender roles for both females and males combined with associated group activities, discussions, writing reflections, and arts integration "positively impacted the attitudes and perceptions of participants in reference to gender equity issues" (Flynn,

2003, p. 1). Flynn (2003) also focused on the teacher's role as a transmitter "of culture and knowledge" and having "an obligation to the well-being of their students and should, therefore, present an unbiased view of the genders" (p. 2). The absence of this intentionality can overtly and covertly propagate the acceptance and expectance of socially normalized gender roles. This supports a connection to the importance of thoughtfully and purposefully designed lessons that uphold ideals of gender equity as a set of "actions, attitudes, and assumptions that provide opportunities and create expectations about individuals" (Women's Equity Resource Center, 2002, p. 1).

Additional classroom action research conducted by Alberti (2010) used a single gender and race student participant sample to investigate African American males' response to representations of class, gender, and race in children's literature. Alberti (2010) encouraged his third grade students to respond critically to these aspects of literature in their discussions and writing across subject areas. By incorporating quality texts as part of the basic education content, his findings showed that students did not respond to social class specific issues, used historical context to frame responses about race, and positioned responses about gender within their personal experiences. Using critical pedagogy as a part of his framework allowed Alberti (2010) to scaffold his students into creating what Freire (1970) referred to as *critical consciousness*, which allowed them to deeply discuss diversity issues presented in the texts and linked these issues to areas of their own lives. Furthermore, Alberti (2010) also upheld the tenants of sociocultural theory by encouraging students to not only vocalized their own opinions, but also allow "their own understanding to be shaped and molded by others' interpretations" (p. 57).

Using the lens of gender as a focus for the decision making during the educational experience, these educators successfully brought multicultural education into the basic education realm. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory partnered with Nieto's (2019) sociopolitical context of multicultural education provides a stable foundation to strengthen this role of curriculum. These theories demand that the learner is the central motivation in thinking about learning; this must usurp even the lessons or subjects being taught. Educators have to understand the importance of integrating knowledge with reflection and experiences (Kamii & Ewing, 1996) to give basic education the merit it deserves to serve all students effectively and equitably.

### **Multicultural Education is Important for All Students**

Nieto and Bode (2019) explained this key component of multicultural education in the sociopolitical context stating, "it is *about* all people, it is also *for* all people, regardless of their ethnicity, ability, social class, language, sexual orientation, religion, gender, race, or other difference" (p. 38, emphasis in original). Realizing that all students receive a partial or incomplete education is a reality in our public school system. There is not the time or resources to teach children every aspect of the continually expanding knowledge platform, but there are avenues to avoid the *miseducation* (Woodson, 2006) of our youth. As educators we have to decide what to include, as mentioned earlier we are the "gatekeepers" to our classroom curriculum (Engebretson, 2016). Knowing multicultural education is important for all students, how do teachers decide and integrate diversity into the daily lives of their students? Some will focus on the policing of Black bodies, others will choose to unmute the silence concerning the LGBTQ+ community, and still others will direct their students' attention to fact that non-Christian religions are

given little attention on school calendars and schedules. I am choosing to focus on gender, not because the other diverse topics do not deserve attention, but as a way to open my students' eyes and ears to an aspect of self-identity they will all grapple with in their lives.

Lynch (1975) reminded us, "Children will not be able to reach their full potential if we view them as members of a group defined by sex rather than as individuals who have unique characteristics and potentials" (p. 20). This sentiment is echoed by Bryan (2000) imploring teachers to "create the opportunity for all children, regardless of gender, to develop their greatest potential" (p. 15). Culhane and Bazeley (2019) reported that the practice of gender stereotyping limits children's potential by labeling behaviors that fall within gender norms as acceptable and those contrary to gender norms as unacceptable. This results in negatively restricting children's views of themselves, their capabilities, and their potential opportunities; it also constrains the parameters of their choice and options, which can lead to unequal gender outcomes. An example of these unequal gender outcomes is evidenced in a study from Yale in which researchers were able to use eye-tracking devices to monitor which students teachers were watching when challenging behaviors were expected. Overwhelmingly teachers were closely observing the boys (76% of the time) when compared to the girls, as reported by Hathaway (2016). The perpetuating cycle this research highlights is: are boys watched more closely because they misbehave more or are they *caught* misbehaving more because they are being watched?

Seemingly, the result of gender stereotyping is the strengthening, whether positively or negatively, of students' gender schema, which affects their "decision-

making processes, emotional responses, occupational opportunities and pursuits, personal appearances, and areas of interest” (Flynn, 2003, p. 1). Students who are able to create a more balanced gender schema are better able to adapt to the constructs of the world beyond school, based on the development of a variety of skills and a behavioral repertoire that encompasses more than just patterns associated with their given gender (Marshall, Robeson, and Keefe, 1999). Flerx, Fidler, and Rogers’ (1976) research suggested that the “acquisition and performance of sex typed activities is a function of a child’s social learning history” (p. 999).

According to Grant and Sleeter (1998) addressing social issues, like gender roles and norms, is important for students because it relates life within the classroom to life outside of it. Keeping this tenant of multicultural education in mind, the proclivity of creating an intentional effort to deconstruct the traditional biases and rebuild expectations based on equable gender roles is a nonnegotiable in today’s educational landscape (Engebretson, 2016).

Teachers in classrooms with children of all ages have documented moments when gender roles and norms have manifested themselves outside of specific lessons or activities. Children’s reaction to traditional versus nontraditional gender norm expression is referred to by Dutro (2001/2002) as “boundary policing and crossing” (p. 379). Dutro reported fifth graders’ behavior reflecting this *boundary* during the students’ selection of books for independent reading. The females did not take issue with reading books that would be considered *masculine* in respect to characters, theme, or genre; however, the tension was palpable when males had to choose books that would be considered *feminine* based on the same criteria. This indicates that the girls could and would eagerly cross the

gender boundary, but the boys policed the gender boundary line to the point of using humor and jokes to deflect unwanted attention due to the book selection or attempting to overcompensate by expressing extremely masculine behaviors after the selection (Dutro, 2001/2002).

Although not referred to using the same terminology, this “boundary policing and crossing” (Dutro, 2001/2002, p. 379) was also highlighted in research from Wohlwend (2009, 2011, 2012) during a yearlong study in a kindergarten setting. By investigating community activities in the classroom, Wohlwend (2009) noted that situations involving the crossing of gender norm boundaries were corrected (both verbally and nonverbally) by the student’s peers as a way of policing the boundary. In this research study, the students’ actions and reactions were linked to the idea that young children practice how to *do* gender. As the girls were playing with dolls and writing stories, they were practicing how to *do* traditionally feminine things (Wohlwend, 2009). When some boys wanted to take part in similar feminine activities, their peers quickly redirected them back to more normalized masculine gender roles. Again, this demonstrates the policing of the boundary and the perpetuation of underlying hegemonic discourse (Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012).

Another research study where the idea of gender boundaries is addressed is in Cvencek, Meltzoff, and Greenwald’s (2011) study of the gender stereotypes related to mathematics in 247 elementary school children in the Seattle area. The purpose of this research was to investigate “implicit math–gender stereotype, gender identity, and math self-concept via a child IAT” (p. 767); IAT is an acronym for Implicit Association Tests. The researchers also examined explicit or self-reporting counterparts in the same

children. From this study, two findings emerged; the children upheld the traditional gender stereotype that math is for boys on both implicit and explicit measures. Also, elementary school boys identified with math more strongly than did girls on both implicit and self-reported measures. The findings indicate that the acquisition of the math-gender stereotypes occur at an early age, and this impacts emerging math self-concepts before there are measurable discrepancies in math achievement (Cvencek, Meltzoff, & Greenwald, 2011).

Using transmediation strategies, explained as the transfer of content from one form of media to another, Rice (2002) also explored gender boundaries and definitions. By partnering children's literature depicting nontraditional gender norms and roles with art based activities in her third grade classroom, the intent was to expand her students' definitions of masculinity and femininity. The examination of students' responses regarding the counterstereotypical characters before and after the interventions found that the discourses available to children influence their responses to children's literature (Rice, 2002). Rice's (2002) research also indicated that over time, both boys and girls were able to challenge their worldviews associated with gender role and norms through persistent implementation of transmediation strategies and peer-to-peer reflections.

Home and church are the only rivals to schools in their impact on gender identity formation (Grant & Sleeter, 1998). Realizing the implications of this position, coupled with the idea that multicultural education is important for all students, schools must find ways to capitalize on their influence. It is the investigation of this influence that provides "a more thorough examination of how structures of race, class, and gender shape the educational experience" of all students (Grant, Brown, & Brown, 2016, p. 15). However,

with the push for gender equity in the classroom, schools need to reevaluate the opportunities they provide for children of all ages to perform behaviors not typically associated with gender norms. According to Grant and Sleeter (1998) one of the roles of school is to relate life within the building to life outside of it; to do this, schools must address social issues, like gender equity. Given the proclivity of the status quo in schools and the natural resistance to change, it will take an intentional effort to deconstruct the traditional biases and rebuild expectations based on equitable gender roles (Engebretson, 2016).

### **Multicultural Education is Pervasive**

For an educational approach to be considered pervasive, it must permeate every aspect of the educational process, such as “the school climate, physical environment, curriculum, and relationships among teachers and students and community” (Nieto and Bode, 2019, p. 38). Considering the perspective of gender roles and norms, this intentional pervasiveness is one way we, as educators, can combat the onslaught of song lyrics, advertising, commercial products, and other influences that are constantly reinforcing traditional, stereotypical gender messages to our youth. This section of reviewed literature highlights some of the areas in which elementary students are likely to be exposed to such messages; thereby further supporting the need for more focus on this aspect of multicultural education. Research has indicated that pervasive stereotyping, regarding diversity of race, gender, ability, language, etc., results in a normalization of biased portrayals of individuals (French, 1992; Ruscher, 2001).

Fitzpatrick and McPherson (2010) investigated the gender stereotypes in contemporary coloring books by examining 889 characters in 56 contemporary coloring



books published in the United States. This study systematically analyzed coloring books to investigate gender stereotypes. It was hypothesized that males would have more active roles and traditional gender stereotypes would be prevalent. The hypotheses were confirmed; males were more active and gender stereotypes were common. “Gender neutral behaviors were more likely to be done by males. Females were more likely to be depicted as children; whereas males were mostly depicted as animals, adults, and superheroes” (p. 127).

Another study conducted by Baker and Raney (2007) analyzed the gender role stereotyping of superheroes in children’s animated programs using 44 different cartoons from 10 different channels during 160 hours of recorded programming. This research was designed to provide an overview of the superhero character population regarding “the demographic, personality traits, communicative acts, and physical behaviors of the superheroes in today’s animated media offerings” (p. 28). An additional focus of the study was how male and female superheroes are portrayed differentially. After the channels and programming had been selected, superhero characters were coded on the following categories: physical appearance, personality traits, physical behaviors, communicative behaviors, and superhero specific characteristics. Males outnumbered females almost two to one. All characters coded as being “muscular” were male; females were most often portrayed with an average body size. Female superheroes were coded as being more emotional, more likely to ask questions, more worried about appearance, easily excitable in crisis, had a mentor more often, worked on a team more often, and more physically attractive than the male superhero characters. Male superheroes were

coded as being more threatening, angry more often, tougher, acting in a mentor role more often, and worked independently more often (Baker & Raney, 2007).

Widening the scope from animated superheroes to the gender role content of children's television programming in general, Aubrey and Harrison (2004) designed partnering studies with the purpose of exploring Midwestern first and second graders' favorite television programs intentionally examining "the gender-role stereotypical, counterstereotypical, and gender-neutral messages" (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004, p. 111) housed within the programming. The secondary purpose was to define a connection between the results and "the children's gender-role values and interpersonal attraction to same- and opposite-gender television characters" (p. 111). Findings indicated that male characters answered more questions, were in more leadership positions, showed ingenuity more often, were more successful in accomplishing goals, and ate more than female characters. From the survey, researchers concluded that boys preferred stereotypical content and placed a higher value on hard work and humor. In addition, "boys' preference for female counterstereotypical content positively predicted interpersonal attraction to male characters" (p. 111). Conversely, girls' "preference for male stereotypical and male counterstereotypical content negatively predicted interpersonal attraction to female characters, whereas, preference for female counterstereotypical and gender-neutral content positively predicted interpersonal attraction to female characters" (p. 111).

The use of educational technology in schools has greatly increased over the last decade; the gender messages contained in these software programs are far from innocuous. Sheldon (2004) designed a study that focused on these messages and the

degree to which gender role stereotyping exists in educational software for preschoolers. The research study, which examined 48 highly rated educational software programs, found that there were significantly more male characters than female characters, the male characters were more likely to portray stereotypically masculine traits, female characters were more likely to demonstrate counterstereotypical behaviors, and female characters were more gender stereotyped in their appearance. These findings make “it difficult for teachers to address gender diversity and suggests that girls are not as valued as boys” (p. 433). Furthermore, dichotomous messages conveyed to girls using this software suggest that regardless of the gender association of their behavioral choices, it is socially necessary for females to appear feminine. This undercurrent is “confusing at best and destructive at worst” (p. 440).

These related research studies report the inundation of traditional gender definitions, roles, and norms and further supports Nieto and Bode’s (2019) recommendation that multicultural education needs to be pervasive in nature to combat these uncontested societal influences. Thinking about the “interplay of societal and school structures and contexts and how they influence learning” (p. 31), the present study is situated within the parameters of the sociopolitical context of multicultural education and is positioned to involve “curriculum, pedagogy, and outreach” (p. 39) that are aligned with this tenant of the theory.

### **Multicultural Education is Education for Social Justice**

Nieto and Bode (2019) defined social justice as “a philosophy, an approach, and actions that embody treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity” (p. 8). They espouse that this form of education “challenges, confronts, and disrupts

misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes” (p. 8) based on all aspects of diversity, specifically listing gender and gender identity. Weaving this approach into the elementary classroom is at the foundation of the present study. According to Sleeter (2015), teaching for social justice includes developing democratic activism, which in this study prepares students to employ strategies of noticing and naming stereotypes and biases, thus enabling them to challenge these forms of discrimination. Carlisle et al. (2006) called this “direct social justice action and intervention,” which occurs when a teacher “seeks to facilitate a living and learning environment for the development of liberatory thinking and action” (p. 61).

Multicultural education with a focus on social justice, in both theory and practice, is not new to the academic arena. Grant and Gibson (2011) conducted a review of the associated literature and devised a three orientation system concerning teacher training and diversity. The third orientation focuses on social justice in multicultural education (teacher preparation and student populations are the first and second). Grant and Gibson (2011) wrote:

Schools are envisioned as pluralistic and democratic places that honor and accommodate diversity; they are also seen as vital for promoting social justice....Teacher education, in turn, helps to instill multicultural perspectives, values, and practices; it encourages preservice teachers to develop a multicultural knowledge base; it cultivates a commitment to social justice; and it encourages teachers to question the purposes of education and who education serves and to enact an alternative vision in their classrooms and schools.... In many ways, a

multicultural, social justice orientation subsumes other approaches to diversity.  
(p. 25)

This insistence to *enact an alternative vision* is what I am focusing on in my classroom. The present study answers the call for awareness and changes in my teaching beliefs and practices to more fully educate my diverse learners concerning gender roles and norms. Working together with my students to meet the goal of social justice and provide “full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (Bell, 1997, p. 3). Peterson and Eeds (2007) stated that sharing stories through read alouds can anchor “the sounds of the language of literature in the minds of students” (p. 7), and have the power to build community, foster connections, express the importance of reflective literature, and facilitate teaching for social justice.

In addition, research conducted by Cowhey (2006) in her elementary classroom highlighted how she strives to teach her students to understand their roles in the world and the importance of doing their part to make it a better place. Cowhey (2006) insisted that children can be scaffolded into thinking critically about the world by creating a socially justice classroom that is:

- Grounded in the lives of our children
- Critical
- Multicultural, antiracist, pro-justice
- Participatory, experimental
- Hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary
- Activist

- Academically rigorous
- Culturally sensitive (p. 18)

Using these interlocking tenets, students can handle the pressure of grappling with diversity and controversy within the safety of the classroom, which is a skill that is transferable to the larger community. Learning through activism as agents of change teaches students compassion and empathy. Being able to communicate and agree/disagree with other's ideas allows students to practice accepting differences and similarities with equal respect (Cowhey, 2006).

### **Multicultural Education is a Process**

The explanation of the multicultural education process is twofold in nature. First, it is “ongoing and dynamic because no one ever stops becoming a multicultural person and knowledge is never complete” (Nieto & Bode, 2019, p. 40); second, it is focused on relationship building, sensitivity, and understanding (Nieto & Bode, 2019). To address our diverse student demographics and undulating societal pressures through this process, classrooms need to be safe spaces for children to tackle topics such as race, gender, social class, religion, ableness, and other diverse aspects. Steele and Cohn-Vargas (2013) referred to this as “identity safe” spaces. Meier (1995) also pointed out schools need to be places where students and teachers feel safe. By establishing and maintaining a caring environment, students will feel more comfortable taking risks, exposing their own biases, acknowledging stereotypes, and knowing that making mistakes is part of the learning process. This demands a trusting environment that accepts different views and welcomes questions that alter the traditional view, which often encompasses prejudices, stereotypes, and biases (Engebretson, 2016).

Continued research on the importance of safe spaces reinforces this key component of multicultural education. Both Dutro (2001/2002) and Rice (2002) insisted children need safe spaces and activities where they can grapple with stereotypical gender boundaries through shared reading of children's literature. Delano-Oriaran and Parks (2015) touted the ability to create safe spaces in our classrooms as a huge benefit for fostering open, honest discussions about tough topics in their research with college aged students. They recommended creating "learning environments for open discussion" (p. 16), which in the elementary classroom is largely accomplished through circle time on the carpet. Everyone is on the same level, trust is built through time spent together, the community norms are established, and discussion topics can range in intensity throughout the year. "In order for learning environments to have integrity and to be places of fairness and trust, learners need to know that they are safe within them— that they will be protected from physical as well as emotional harm" (Carothers, 1995, p. 31). Using seminar style discussions, students learn the language needed to agree and disagree with each other's ideas. Delano-Oriaron and Parks (2015) highlighted the importance that language or vocabulary can have on providing everyone with an entry point. Taking time to build this knowledge assists in the development of the classroom as a safe space.

The idea of classroom safe spaces connects to Dewey's idea of "social spirit" as discussed by Mason (2017), which pointed out the varied, and often opposing, purposes of education. To cultivate the four attitudes, which are directness, open-mindedness, single-mindedness, and responsibility (p. 43), needed to create social spirit, the classroom must be a safe space for students to explore and dissect tough topics. Much of the process of multicultural education hinges in this assurance of safety; it acts as a hindrance

or a building block, depending on its level of development (Meier, 1995). Gallagher (2016) reiterated this approach relating the idea of safe spaces to creating a classroom family that is “linked together by obligation” (p. 8).

Sadowski (2017) acknowledged the importance of safe spaces in classrooms, but challenged schools to be more than that. His research in middle school classrooms lead him to suggest using a language of “enumeration” (p. 6) to promote a school environment that understands and responds to the situation of marginalized students, which constructs an environment where all educators, not just certain classrooms, are seen as safe havens for students to find respite. Taking it one step further, Sadowski (2017) called for educators and policymakers “to move beyond ‘safe’ and create schools that affirm” diverse groups of students (p. 9). Caldwell (2012) also addressed the need for “a structured environment made safe” (p. 8) and discussed that “it is important to lay clear ground rules for respect” (p. 7) when delving into topics of diversity, such as gender, race, language, ethnic background, and ableness. This is paramount for developing an environment that is welcoming to varying ideas and views and fostering a learning environment where children know that they are more than just “a means to achieve a desirable social end” (Noddings, 2005, p. 44). Within this safe space learners of all ages can explore, question, and reflect on topics of diversity that may otherwise seem risky, tough, or unmentionable.

### **Multicultural Education is Critical Pedagogy**

The principles behind critical pedagogy are not new to the field of education; they have been used on multiple continents for many decades. According to Giroux (2010), critical pedagogy is:



...the educational movement guided by both passion and principle to help students develop a consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, empower the imagination, connect knowledge and truth to power and learn to read both the word and the world as part of a broader struggle for agency, justice and democracy ... [It] currently offers the very best, perhaps the only, chance for young people to develop and assert a sense of their rights and responsibilities to participate in governing, and not simply being governed by prevailing ideological and material forces. (p. 1)

Critical pedagogy is a tenant of not only the sociocultural context of multicultural education, but also critical education theory. Nieto and Bode (2019) define critical pedagogy as an approach that “values diversity and encourages critical thinking, reflection, and action” whereby “students are empowered both individually and collectively to become active learners” who are secure enough “to take risks, to be curious, and to question” (p. 41). In the classrooms discussed in this chapter (Alberti, 2010; Cowhey, 2006; Cvencek, Meltzoff, & Greenwald, 2011; Delano-Oriaran & Parks, 2015; Dutro, 2001/2002; Flynn, 2003; Hass, 2017; Rice, 2002; Sadowski, 2017; Wohlwend, 2009) educators are employing this method with students ranging from kindergarten to college, which acts as evidence that third grade is not too early to incorporate this form of pedagogy.

While young children are read to before they can read or spoken to before they can speak, not often are they immersed in critical curriculum before their school experience begins. For most, classrooms offer “the first prolonged opportunity to step outside of the protective, homogenous bubble of home and into the complexities of a

diverse world” (Hass, 2017, p 24). Considering this study is referring to the elementary classroom, from the start of schooling the curriculum must offer the skills needed “to cut through the knowledge jungle created by power wielders to perpetuate their own privilege” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. vii), be gender fair, and offer young learners’ representative and inclusive, yet varied, exposure to equitable curricula. When students better understand the complexities, experiences, and perspectives from a diverse representation of the world, they are more prepared to be informed and active agents of change in their lives. Nieto (1992) supported this by stating “one of the primary purposes of education is to give young people the skills, knowledge, and critical awareness to become productive members of a diverse and democratic society” (p. 59). This is echoed by Howard (2013) decades later, stating the purpose of education is “...the development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will allow them to fully participate in a democratic society” (p. 63).

## **Conclusion**

To determine the possible impact of using a curriculum based on Nieto and Bode’s (2019) sociopolitical context of multicultural education with a focus on nontraditional gender roles and norms, I reviewed related literature. It was beneficial to conduct research regarding literature focused on the problem of practice of disrupting gender worldviews the elementary school level and other levels of education. Using research from classroom based studies and other input from the field of education indicates this approach to teaching ignites a natural curiosity for a deeper understanding of gender roles and norms. The information housed within this literature review

strengthened the action research study by offering insight and organization of past research pertaining to the topic.

This investigation of self and others using texts to unveil students' assumptions regarding gender roles and expectations highlights and maintains all the key characteristics of multicultural education. It is antiracist and antidiscriminatory; it is basic education; it is important for all students; it is pervasive; it is education for social justice; it is a process; it is critical pedagogy (Nieto & Bode, 2019, p. 32). Multicultural education is fostered within a caring classroom culture in which students feel more comfortable taking risks, acknowledging their own biases, exposing stereotypes, questioning traditional worldviews, and accepting change.

## CHAPTER THREE: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

### Introduction

The action research study's problem of practice is based on the need for an elementary curriculum unit that depicts gender roles and norms in nontraditional ways. The landscape of gender roles in today's classroom is constantly changing. It is imperative, starting at the elementary level, for teachers to have the resources and knowledge to not only be able to understand the impact these roles have on students, but also have the ability to help students construct meaning concerning issues of gender roles and norms. Knowing that my students are inundated with a patriarchal curriculum that uses historical perspectives dominated by a limited scope on gender identities, there is a need for specific intervention that provides a broader platform on which to base their beliefs.

Through a qualitative case study approach to action research, I gauged the impact of a teacher designed curriculum unit using texts that depicted nontraditional gender norms and roles while using several theories to frame my study. The overarching theoretical framework is based on Nieto and Bode's (2019) *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*. The key components of multicultural education demand that it is antidiscriminatory, basic education that is important for all students. It is an educational process that is pervasive in nature, based in critical pedagogy, and includes education for social justice.

Other theories undergird this research study as well. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) aligned the purpose of education with the idea of creating a more socially just world (Itin, 1999). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) reminded us that students need to be able to notice and name inequalities associated gender, so they can develop their sense of identity within society. Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) suggested that humans learn from and with each other in a variety of settings. The classroom needs to be a place where all students can explore and expand the boundaries of their understanding concerning gender roles and norms.

### **Research Questions**

The dissertation in practice attempted to answer the following research question using a qualitative case study action research design.

**Research Question:** What is the impact of an English Language Arts unit involving texts and activities that depict nontraditional gender roles and norms on third grade students in a Southern, working class, elementary school?

Within this study the following set of sub-questions were also addressed.

**Sub-Question 1:** How are students' preconceived notions in relation to gender roles and norms challenged over the course of the implemented curricular unit?

**Sub-Question 2:** What are some of the difficulties of implementing a curricular unit that disrupts traditional gender roles and norms in an urban, Southern school?

### **Chapter Overview**

This chapter details the process of implementing the current action research study using a qualitative case study research design to determine the impact of exposing third grade students to literature with nontraditional gender role representations. This chapter

explains the context of the study to situate it in the local setting, my role as not only the classroom teacher, but also the researcher, and the participants selected for the case study. Also discussed in this chapter are the data collection and data analysis methods. A summary concludes the chapter to maintain the overall methodology of the current action research study as an intervention in a third grade English Language Arts (ELA) classroom exploring nontraditional gender roles as presented in children's literature and other texts.

### **Description of Intervention**

After realizing the need for a curriculum intervention designed to offer elementary students an expansive view of gender roles, I began to look for an avenue by which to accomplish this task. Many studies touted the benefits of using children's literature as a platform to investigate topics such as race, language, ableness, socioeconomic status, and gender within the elementary classroom. After reading about the potential of using read alouds as a framework for helping students grapple with issues of diversity, I decided to conduct this action research with the students in my third grade ELA classroom at Field Rapids Elementary School (FRES) in the midlands of South Carolina over a four week window of time. This occurred during the Fall of 2020; therefore, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the school district was operating in an "eLearning" setting. This entailed the students and me logging on to Microsoft TEAMS to conduct the school day through a virtual platform. As the teacher researcher in this proposed study, I used a systematic approach to tackle this identified problem of practice by investigating my students' preconceived perceptions about gender, purposefully exposing them to children's literature combined with activities, interviews, and

discussions designed to challenge and expand their worldviews, and then critically reflecting on what changes have/have not occurred as a way to better meet their needs and tailor my instruction.

### **Rationale for the Research Design**

The present research study is based on a qualitative research design focused on participants in the natural setting where the focus phenomenon occurs. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained this approach by stating, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 6). To closely examine how my third grade students (participants) at FRES (classroom is the natural setting) construct meaning associated with gender roles (the phenomenon), I employed a case study focus combined with a critical research approach. The “bounded system” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 38) I used for the unit of analysis was my third grade ELA class for the 2020-2021 school year. The goal of this study was to determine the impact a curriculum involving literature that depicts nontraditional gender roles could have on third graders. The present study followed an action research cycle (Mertler, 2014) and utilized the qualitative data collection trifecta of interviews, observations, and documents (student and teacher artifacts, such as lesson plans, artwork, journals, and surveys). The cycle allowed me to *plan* an intervention, *implement* the intervention, *analyze* data collected during the intervention, and *reflect* on outcomes as a way to adjust for future teaching.

### **Action Research Validity**

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) there are several relevant methods for ensuring validity in action research. To echo the importance of validity, Mertler (2014)

stated, “The determination of validity ultimately has a substantial effect on the interpretation of those data, once they have been analyzed, and the subsequent conclusions drawn from those results” (p. 149). The concept of validity is dependent on whether or not the collected data measures what was intended to be measured; in other words, did it answer the research questions. In qualitative research, validity is closely linked with trustworthiness, which contains the subcategories of credibility (i.e., the results are believable), and dependability (i.e., changes are accounted for and explained). Triangulation, referred to more accurately as polyangulation, considering the many possible sources of data, is described by Mertler (2014) as “the process of relating and integrating two or more sources of data in order to establish their quality and accuracy” (p. 42). To employ this method, I compared answers I received in interviews to what I saw in observations and I relied on what the children wrote about to compare to what they said in group discussions. By using numerous data sources, the convergence strengthened the validity of the overall research study. Another method I used to ensure internal validity (or credibility) is referred to by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as member checks or respondent validation. The process simply means that as the researcher, I asked my students if the data I recorded was an accurate description or recount of what they said, wrote, or thought.

### **Context of Research Study**

The setting for this action research study is Field Rapids Elementary School (FRES) located in Scottsland School District Four (pseudonym). Situated in the capital city of Columbia, South Carolina, the school serves a population of approximately 750 students, a relatively generous portion of the nearly 24,000 students in Scottsland School



District Four. The district operates 52 school campuses, 28 being elementary, to handle this vast number of students. FRES student community is diverse; composed of approximately 23% White, 69% African American, 4% Hispanic, and 4% Other according to recent school demographics reports. Starting in the 2015-2016 school year, all students in the district are offered breakfast and lunch at no cost as part of a federal program called Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National School Lunch program. CEP is “a non-pricing meal service option for schools and school districts in low-income areas,” which allows the nation’s highest poverty schools and districts to serve meals to “all enrolled students without collecting household applications” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019). Students may participate in this program regardless of family income. Prior to the implementation of this program, approximately 60 percent of students attending FRES qualified for free or reduced cost meals. FRES houses an instructional staff comprised of the principal, assistant principal, assistant administrator, curriculum resource teacher, 44 teachers, 14 instructional assistants, two guidance counselors, two speech therapists, reading coach, reading interventionist, media specialist, and media assistant. Other professionals, such as occupational therapists, social workers, and Autism specialists serve a cluster of schools in the district.

The upper elementary area of FRES consists of three grades (3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup>) with sixteen general education classrooms and two self-contained special education classrooms. For this action research study, I focused on my third grade ELA class. The ELA block begins at 7:45 a.m. and ends at 9:45 a.m. daily. The students have five academic blocks of ELA instruction weekly. Apart from ELA instruction, remainder of

the seven-hour instructional day consists of math, science/health, social studies, related arts, lunch, intervention, and recess.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the teacher-researcher in this action research study, I am a third grade teacher at FRES. Daily academic responsibilities include a two hour ELA block, a one hour math block, one 45 minute science/health or social studies block, and a 30 minute intervention block. The student population of the ELA and math class varies depending on placement tests. I serve approximately 15 individual students during the 2020-2021 school year, with some overlapping between classes and some just coming to me for one class. At FRES classroom teachers also are required to attend to other responsibilities such as daily lunch and recess duty, weekly faculty and professional learning community meetings, professional development opportunities, conferences, and other activities indicated by administration. As the teacher researcher conducting this four week study, I took on the roles of teacher researcher, active participant observer, and community insider (Herr & Anderson, 2015), in which I actively engaged in teaching, observing the outcomes of the teaching, monitoring the effects, and adjusting instruction accordingly (Mills, 2011). I also collaborated with the media specialist and classroom teachers to select the most appropriate texts for this study.

### **Participants**

Student participants consisted of the third grade students placed in my ELA class during the 2020-2021 school year. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) this sample is based on “time, money, location, availability...and so on” (p. 98). The reasoning behind this selection is that I spend two uninterrupted hours a day with these children.

Participation was offered to all students in my ELA class, and six students were chosen for the interview portion. These students are between the ages of eight and nine, and diverse based on race, gender, and social class. Guardian consent forms completed by the parent/guardian of the participants granted permission for their children to take part in the study. The following information details the student-participants.

- C.A. is an eight year old, White female. She is a perfectionist and eager to please. In class, she is attentive, follows class rules, and exhibits a high level of work ethic. She began the school year with above grade level reading and mathematics skills. C.A. lives her with two mothers and a younger brother. A high level of importance is placed on education at home. Both parents are in the education profession. She does eLearning from home.
- J. B. is a nine year old, African-American male. He is new to FRES this year, but has fit in nicely. He is talented not only academically, but also musically and artistically. He is funny and quick-witted. He began the school year with above average reading and mathematics skills. J.B. lives with his mother, father, and younger sister. He does eLearning from home.
- C.D. is a nine year old, White male. He is athletic and a gifted writer. C.D. splits time between his mother's house and father's house. They were recently divorced, but he is adjusting well to the changes. He also has an older brother. He began the school year with above average reading and mathematics skills. He does eLearning from home.
- J.D. is an eight year old, African-American male. He is easily distracted, but enjoys participating in class discussions. He lives with his mother, father, and

younger brother. Both parents are in the education profession. He began with year with above average skills in reading and mathematics. He does eLearning from home or his father's classroom.

- K.E. is a nine year old, White female. She is out spoken, confident, and a leader in the classroom. She lives with her mother, father, and older sister. She began the school year with average grade level skills in reading and above average mathematics skills. She does eLearning from home.
- S.F. is an eight year old, White female. She is quiet, but inquisitive, often waiting to hear other's thoughts before sharing her own. S.F. lives with her mother, father, and younger sister. She began the school year slightly above average in reading and mathematics skills. She does eLearning from her day care.
- E.G. is an eight year old, White male. He is impulsive, creative, and caring. He lives with his mother, father, and older brother. He began the year with above average skills in reading and mathematics. At the start of the year, he was doing eLearning from day care, but switched to home to have more support.
- E.R. is a nine year old, White male. He is quiet, somewhat shy, and outrageously gifted. He is a prolific reader, often reading a book when he is in class. E.R. also enjoys online games such as Fortnite and Minecraft. He is a confident, quick worker, and schoolwork does not present a challenge to him. E.R. has a slight speech impediment, but it does not impact him academically or socially. He lives with his mother, father, younger brother, and younger sister. He began the school year well above average skills in reading and mathematics. He does eLearning from home.

- N.S. is a nine year old, African-American female. She is selective about her vocal involvement in the classroom, but is eager to please and willing to try new things. She lives with her mother and older sister. She began the year with above average skills in reading and mathematics. Often her mother's job requires her to travel, so N.S. has to do her eLearning in the car using a district provided internet hot spot. Otherwise, she does her eLearning from home.
- A.T. is an eight year old, African-American/Native American/White male. He is energetic, active, and very responsive to the needs of others. He loves to write and illustrate comics and zombie stories, as well as play online games. In class, he is eager to participate, share, and connect to others. A.T. lives with his mother, step-father, older brother, and younger sister. He began the year with slightly below grade level skills in reading and average skills in mathematics. At the beginning of the year, A.T. was living in a hotel, so at times internet connectivity was challenging for eLearning. He is in a house now, but his attendance is still spotty.
- L.T. is a nine year old, White female. She is active in classroom activities, eager to please, and works hard. She does not mind going first to try something and is willing to make mistakes in the learning process. L.T. lives with her mother, father, and older brother. Her mother had a stroke during the first semester of this school year, so adjustments have been made in her family to help with the recovery process. Her grandmother is very involved. L.T. began the year with average skills in reading and mathematics. She does eLearning from home.

- J.W. is an eight year old, African-American female. She is extremely quiet and rarely participates in classroom discussions, although her work ethic is strong. She does take part more in a small group setting. J.W. lives with her mother, father, and older brother. She began the year with above average skills in reading and mathematics. She does eLearning from her father's shop.
- A.W. is an eight year old, African-American male. He is a compassionate and empathic classmate. He works at a slow and steady pace, but the product is always completed above expectations. He lives with his mother, father, younger sister, older brother, and same aged cousin. A.W. began the year with above average skills in reading and mathematics. He does eLearning from home, but is often tardy logging on to class.

This number of participants allowed me to examine the perceptions of students to better understand the impact of the implemented unit of study and effectively address the research questions. My class is slightly smaller than that of an average size for a third grade classroom in my school. All students in the ELA class will have access to the literature and associated activities during the course of the action research study.

**Ethical Considerations and Protection of Participants.** Measures of ethical protection for my student participants are guided by the principles of accurate disclosure, beneficence, honesty, and importance (Mertler, 2014). In an attempt to avoid any forms of deception within the study, an informed consent letter (Appendix A) was sent to parents/guardians through Class Dojo using Microsoft Forms. This letter described the research topic, outlined the research plan, and stated the expected student involvement. This letter also explained that participation is voluntary and students can be withdrawn by

parents/guardians at any time. Another emphasis of the letter was that the decision to join or not join the study would *not* impact the student's letter grade in my ELA class. Regardless of participation choices, all students have the same educational opportunities throughout the course of the class.

Issues of confidentiality and anonymity were handled in a variety of ways during the action research study. Students were assigned identification numbers to be used when referencing and organizing data. The file containing the connection between the numbers and the names and files containing data were saved on a password protected laptop. Hard copies were kept under lock and key in my classroom's file cabinet. In addition, the school and school district were given pseudonyms to further maintain confidentiality and anonymity of student participants. At any point when a student's name was required to accurately portray the data, initials were used.

The principle of beneficence (Mertler, 2014) touts the importance of acquiring "knowledge about human beings" and never suppressing "academic progress" (p. 112). With this in mind, the action research was designed to keep the focus on the students. As the teacher researcher, it was imperative that I not only attempt to meet the needs of all learners by providing adjustments, interventions, and enrichments as deemed necessary by individual student growth, but also accommodations as indicated for any student on an individualized education plan (IEP) or 504 plan.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Several data collection instruments were implemented during this study. According to Hubbard and Power (2003), "The more data-collection tools you have, the better equipped you are to answer any question" (p. 36). To fully address the research

questions posed in this study, data collection included recordings of class discussions, student work, teacher lesson plans, recordings of semi-structured interviews, teacher observations, and pre- and post-surveys. This assortment of data sources allowed me to gather rich information and triangulate the data while seeking to find themes and patterns.

**Class Discussions.** Discussions happening during and after the reading of the pre-selected literature offered a glimpse into my students' developing understanding of gender roles and norms. I recorded these discussions using Microsoft Stream and transcribed them after school by comparing the transcription generated by Microsoft Stream to the actual dialogue. Doing this transcription myself increased my familiarity with the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Class discussions differed from observations due to my role in the interaction. These discussions mimicked seminar style encounters and I facilitated the experience, using pre-scripted questions and talking points as needed based on the ebb and flow of the students' engagement.

**Student Work.** Various forms of student work were collected during the four week research study. Selected artifacts were collected based on their ability to demonstrate student meaning making or questioning concerning the topic of gender roles and norms. These included student journal entries, art projects, illustrations, news articles with student responses in the margins, classroom activities, and/or posted responses on class anchor charts. Appendix C contains the pages students received in their gender studies folder.

**Teacher Lesson Plans.** I created lesson plans based on the "Shattering the Glass Slipper" unit of study. These weekly plans detailed books being read, standards being covered, and activities associated with the gender topics highlighted in the books. This



provided an overview to the scope and sequence of the unit. Weekly outlines are included in Appendix B.

**Interviews.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted half way through the unit and again at the end of the unit. The interview participants were diverse based on race, gender, and social class, but all participants were either eight or nine years old. Using a semi-structured approach allowed me to have some questions prewritten (Appendix D) to act as a guide, but also provided the needed flexibility to be able to respond to the student's needs and information presented (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Final interviews also provided students an opportunity to reflect on their growth, new understandings, and ask any questions they did not want to voice in larger group settings.

**Observations.** Observations have an important distinction from interviews and class discussions because they occur in the natural setting (classroom) where the focus phenomenon occurs, but they are not guided by a researcher. Furthermore, observations allowed me to collect data that “represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of the world obtained in an interview” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 137). As a participant observer, I took anecdotal notes during collaborative art projects, new article discussions, and other times throughout the unit of study that did not require my direct involvement. “Observation makes it possible to record behavior as it is happening” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 139) without the worry of interrupting academic progress. Written accounts of what occurs during observation periods are referred to as “*field notes*” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 149, emphasis in original). Even in the virtual eLearning setting these observations were

possible through online collaborative events that were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Stream.

**Surveys.** Surveys are “data collection techniques that involve the administration of a set of questions or statements to a sample of people” (Mertler, 2014, p. 138). Since this is a qualitative case study, the form of survey I used is referred to as a *questionnaire*, in which students were given open-ended questions to respond to in written form and multiple choice questions. Using open-ended questions provided students the opportunity to respond without constraints on their thoughts or feelings. I administered a pre- and post-survey using Microsoft Forms to compare my students’ perceptions about gender roles before and after the unit. There were 36 questions on the surveys, and they focused on fleshing out details about my students’ perceptions of gender roles and norms. There were questions related to school, professional jobs, social roles, and other aspects of gender roles and norms. The survey can be found in Appendix E.

### **Research Procedure**

During the four week period of the action research study, I implemented the “Shattering the Glass Slipper” unit in my third grade ELA classroom virtually through Microsoft TEAMS. Mertler’s (2014) action research study design provided the framework for the study. This design is comprised of a four stage procedure (Mertler, 2014, p. 36): planning, acting, developing, and reflecting. In the *acting* stage of the action research, the plan is implemented and data is collected and analyzed. For this study, at the onset students will take a pre-survey to record their current understanding and views of gender roles. The students participated in interactive read alouds featuring literature that depicted nontraditional gender roles. Students discussed the texts, charted

the difference between what society has normalized versus what the characters present, and responded to writing prompts in their writing journals and gender study folder. To conclude the unit, students took a post-survey to gauge any changes in their perceptions, thus determining if the unit had an impact. Throughout the unit, integrated art projects, collaborative activities, and semi-structured interviews were also used to further students' exposure to varying worldviews.

### **Data Analysis: Qualitative Methods**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) insist that in qualitative research the collecting and analyzing of data must be continuous and simultaneous. To accomplish this, I used the constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data will be coded using the two-step process outlined by Hay (2005) in which I began with basic color coding to distinguish overall themes, and then followed with an in depth, interpretive code in which more specific themes and patterns were identified. Emergent data was also used to understand the impact in multiple ways.

**Class Discussions.** After being transcribed from Microsoft Stream recordings, discussions involving topics related to gender roles and norms were color coded using basic coding to establish themes and patterns. These discussions happened after read alouds and were facilitated by me, as the teacher researcher.

**Student Work.** I coded three journal entries and/or gender study sheets for each student in order to determine students' development concerning their own worldviews of gender during the intervention period. The entries were from lessons that addressed the issue of diversity in gender roles and norms within texts. I collected qualitative data from the writing journals and gender studies folders by color coding entries to establish themes

and patterns. I compared entries to look for change over the course of the four week intervention. The codebook (Appendix F) shows the definition of each code and two student examples that would fit in these codes. Students' shared responses on class charts were also coded.

**Teacher Lesson Plans.** Lesson outlines used in the “Shattering the Glass Slipper” unit are included in Appendix B. In accordance with Mertler’s (2014) developing phase of the action research cycle, lessons were annotated as needed to reflect teacher thoughts and any revisions needed for future teaching.

**Interviews.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students from my ELA class halfway through the unit and again at the conclusion. These interviews provided insight into student thinking and development of gender role ideas; they helped me find out what is “in and on someone else’s mind” (Patton, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108). Interviews were transcribed from recordings on Microsoft Stream. Student comments pertaining to gender roles were color coded to find patterns and themes.

**Observations.** I observed students’ activities, interactions, and conversations to take note of any comments connected to gender roles or norms. Students remained logged in to Microsoft TEAMS during independent and group work to allow for these observations to occur. These notes were color coded to add to the growing patterns and themes in the coded data.

**Surveys.** Pre- and post-surveys were in part open ended in nature. Student responses were color coded in accordance with the themes and patterns emerging from

the data collection. Surveys were compared from the beginning of the unit to the end of the unit to determine the impact of the unit on students' perceptions about gender roles.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter Three outlines the methodology of the qualitative action research case study designed to examine how third grade students in an urban, working class, elementary classroom in Columbia, South Carolina respond to children's literature that presents gender roles in ways that challenges the traditionally accepted norm. By strengthening the students' awareness of gender stereotypes and biases, they are better able to discern what has been normalized by our society and what new norms they are willing to develop themselves and accept in others. The study explored students' perceptions of gender roles at the beginning of the research period, introduced literature and activities that were positioned to activate acceptance and understanding of counterculture roles, and then reexamined students' perceptions at the end of the research period to determine impact. Data were collected using surveys, observations, interviews, student artifacts, and students' writing. Data were analyzed throughout the collection process using the constant comparative method. As a result of this constant comparison and reflection, I was able to further refine my gender role unit to better serve future students. This unit will be shared with other elementary teachers at FRES to benefit instruction in this area for students outside of my classroom as well.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA**

### **Introduction**

The need for the present study was rooted in the fact that my current curricular materials did not adequately offer counterstereotypical views of gender roles and norms to my students. By supplementing the district provided content with intentionally selected read alouds, news articles, activities, and projects that allowed my students to explore ideas that were contradictory to popular societal views, they were able to grapple with this aspect of diversity in a safe, trusting environment. The student-participants were all third graders assigned to my ELA class for the 2020-2021 school year. The setting for the present study was an urban, working class elementary school in Columbia, South Carolina. The following research questions guided the development and implementation of the curricular unit. The data collection was designed to aid in the answering of these questions.

**Research Question:** What is the impact of an English Language Arts unit involving texts and activities that depict nontraditional gender roles and norms on third grade students in a Southern, working class, elementary school?

**Sub-Question 1:** How are students' preconceived notions in relation to gender roles and norms challenged over the course of the implemented curricular unit?

**Sub-Question 2:** What are some of the difficulties of implementing a curricular unit that disrupts traditional gender roles and norms in an urban, Southern school?

## **Chapter Overview**

The introduction to this chapter included a review of the problem of practice, purpose, participants, setting, and research questions to serve as a reminder of the foundation of the present study. The remainder of the chapter is focused on the presentation and analysis of the data. Data are organized chronologically to mirror the implementation of the “Shattering the Glass Slipper” curricular unit and associated data collection. Data presentation is divided into six sections: pre-survey, week one, week two, week three, week four, and post-survey. In the sections pertaining to each week, the news article, read alouds, activities, and discussions are detailed to provide an inclusive look at the collected data. The post-survey section highlights the comparison between pre- and post-survey answers. Data were collected during October of 2020-2021 school year. During this time the students were in an eLearning (online/virtual) setting due to COVID-19 protocols. Integrated in the data presentation is an analysis that helps to deepen the understanding of the findings.

## **Presentation and Analysis of Data**

**Pre-survey.** On the first day of “Shattering the Glass Slipper” a pre-survey was administered via Microsoft Forms (Appendix E). At this time the students were all learning virtually, so this program was selected over a traditional pencil/paper survey. In addition, the students were familiar with this platform since we used it multiple times a week to submit assignments and share information. Students completed the survey while staying in a Microsoft TEAMS meeting with me; this enabled me to be available for questions as needed. The survey consisted of 36 questions; the first asked the students’ names, the next five were open ended, short answer questions, and the remaining

questions were multiple choice. The open ended questions were designed to uncover the students' preexisting schema related to gender. The multiple choice questions helped me to gauge the students' current worldviews concerning gender roles and norms. To do this, questions focused either on professional roles or abilities/behaviors. Two sample questions from each of these areas are located in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1** *Sample questions from the pre-survey*

Category	Sample Questions	Survey Question Number
Open Ended Questions	What do you know about gender?	#2
	What does it mean to act like a boy?	#4
Multiple Choice Section 1  Professional Roles: Who do you think of when you read the following sentences?  Answer choices: Male, Female, and Both	The astronaut went to outer space.	#12
	The lawyer met with a new client.	#18
Multiple Choice Section 2  Abilities/Behaviors: Who is better at the following things?  Answer Choices: Boys, Girls, and Both Equally	Math	#24
	Dancing	#31

On the open ended questions, students had limited ideas about gender, gender stereotypes, and gender norms; little detail was provided in most answers. Table 4.2 shows all the open ended questions and sample answers for each. Overall, students answered in accordance with the findings of Miller, Nolla, Eagly, and Uttal (2018) by



having routinely stereotypical views of roles regarding gender norms. This was also true of students' opinions on the abilities and behaviors questions. The post-survey section in this chapter shows the chart comparisons of all answers before and after the unit.

**Table 4.2** *Open-ended questions and sample answers on the pre-survey*

<b>Open-ended Questions from pre-survey</b>	<b>Sample Answers</b>
What do you know about gender?	<p>-That a female is a girl and male is a boy.</p> <p>-Male and female, that's all I know.</p> <p>-I know there are some things that boys normally do that girls don't vice versa.</p> <p>-male boy female girl</p> <p>-You can be a boy or a girl.</p> <p>-That a girl is called female and a boy is called male.</p> <p>-A lot of girls aren't able to do things because of their gender. Boys can do a lot more.</p>
Who taught you how to act like a boy or act like a girl?	<p>-nobody</p> <p>-I don't know.</p> <p>-my mom and dad</p> <p>-I think I just learned when I was little.</p> <p>-watching other people</p> <p>-my dad</p> <p>-my mom</p> <p>-Boys can act however they want.</p>
What does it mean to act like a boy?	<p>-You do boy stuff.</p> <p>-I don't know.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-smart, intelligent, big and tall</li> <li>-deep voice</li> <li>-It means to do more athletic things.</li> <li>-to like to play basketball and skateboard</li> <li>-Acting like a boy means to relax and be who you are.</li> <li>-They play in the mud.</li> <li>-sports</li> <li>-to act nice or mean</li> </ul>
What does it mean to act like a girl?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-You do girl stuff.</li> <li>-I'm not a girl.</li> <li>-I really don't know because I am a boy.</li> <li>-dancing</li> <li>-I don't know.</li> <li>-It means to like girl stuff, like pink or flowers.</li> <li>-smart</li> <li>-I'm not a girl but I know what it's like being a girl because I am surrounded by girls every day, so it means to be very fancy and natural.</li> <li>-make-up and dress up</li> <li>-To like pink and do girly things like having sleepovers and wearing makeup.</li> <li>-girls wear make-up</li> </ul>
<b>What is a gender stereotype? Have you experienced any?</b>	-no

	-I don't know.  -No, I haven't.  -No, not exactly.  -It's like when someone says you can't do this because you're a boy or a girl.  -I do not know what a gender stereotype is.  -I think it's what girls and boys should do.  -I don't know.
--	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Week One.** Data collection occurred in the fall of 2020-2021 school year; week one was October 5-9, 2020. During this week, we used the pre-survey, a poem, three group activities, one NewsELA article, a personality collage project, and two read alouds (Appendix G). We also spent some time discussing how we were going to define the term “stereotype” and what the concept of normalcy was as it related to the present study. Considering the age of my participants, we agreed to the following definitions:

- **Stereotype-** a simple idea that is *not* true for everyone in a group
- **Normalcy-** when you act or think in a way that others decided is normal or right
  - **Others** was later defined as society, people around you, and/or people in power

Even in the early days of this study, the students questioned who decided what was normal and what was not normal. They also questioned how so many different people could agree on what fits into these categories. Another topic that came up in this first week was why certain people have the power to decide what is considered normal.

According to Davis (1997):

We live in a world of norms. Each of us endeavors to be normal or else deliberately tries to avoid that state. There is probably no area of contemporary life in which some idea of norm, mean or average has not been calculated. (p. 9)

**Poem.** The third grade curriculum at my school includes a weekly focus poem through which we cover standards and practice shared reading. I used this familiar platform as a way to introduce the concept of gender stereotypes to my students. The selected poem was “I’m Great” (anonymous poet). In this poem, the speaker is attempting to get better at several different activities, but the speaker’s gender is never mentioned directly through the use of pronouns or illustrations. As my class was discussing the poem, every student indicated that they thought the speaker was a boy. When I asked why they made this decision, they agreed that the speaker was doing activities that a boy would usually do, i.e., playing basketball and riding a skateboard. This discussion provided me with the ideal situation in which to introduce the idea of gender stereotypes.

**Activities.** I wanted my students to recognize the impact that societal gender norms have in their own lives and the lives of those around them. To do this we made a list of stereotypes that could be applied by society to third graders based on gender; we started with a list about third grade boys (Figure 4.1). Listed below are some of the examples the boys suggested to finish the prompt: All third grade boys like....

- *Being active and playing sports*
- *Video games*
- *Colors like blue, black, and red*
- *Superheroes*

- *Sneakers*

The girls added that boys are:

- *Loud*
- *Messy*
- *Don't take showers*
- *Rough*
- *Crazy*

These additions by the girls inspired spirited feedback from the boys as they rejected the notion that they could be stereotyped in these ways. All the boys agreed that at least one thing on the cumulative list did apply to them each individually; however, they also discovered that many items on the list did not apply to them individually. In this space, they were able to directly connect the idea of how stereotypes are perpetuated in society.

Next, we created a list of stereotypes associated with third grade girls; some of the suggestions added by the girls are listed below to finish the prompt: All third grade girls like...

- *Singing and dancing*
- *Make-up and hair ties*
- *The colors pink and purple*
- *Mermaids*
- *Being quiet*
- *Being neat and tidy*
- *Cute/adorable things*
- *Gymnastics*

Reflecting the inspiration the boys received from the girls' previous answers, the boys then added the following suggestions to the prompts. All third grade girls are....

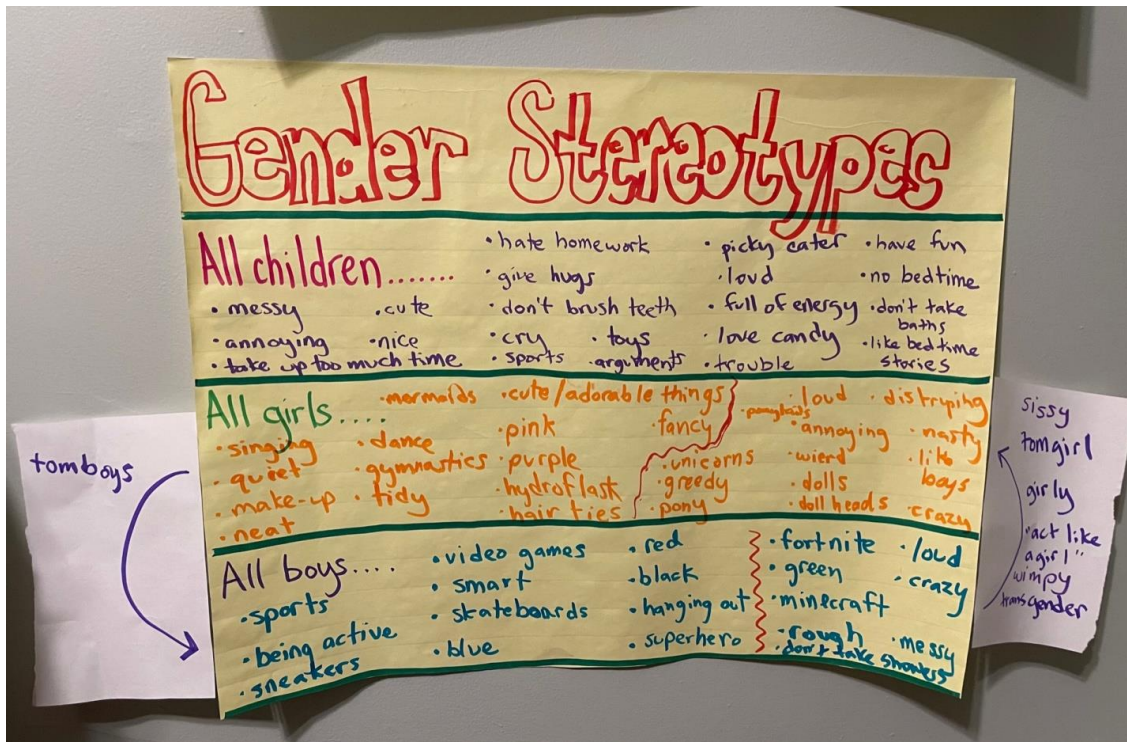
- *Annoying*
- *Weird*
- *Greedy*

And that all girls like....

- *Dolls*
- *Unicorns*
- *Ponytails*
- *Disrupting others*
- *Boys*

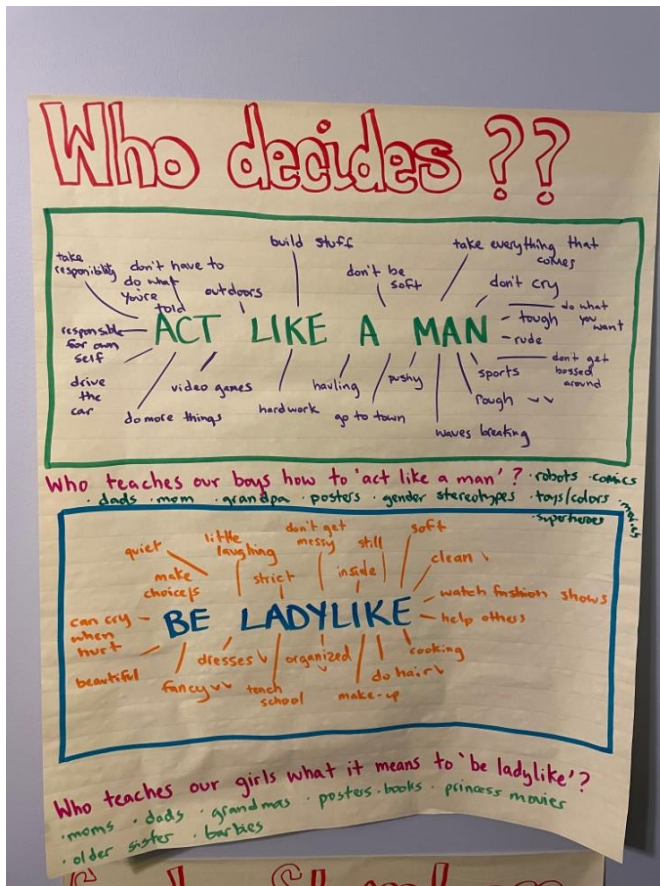
As noted with the boys, the girls were also able to find stereotypes that they did identify with and those that did not fit their current views about themselves.

We also used this activity to discuss the idea of crossing gender boundaries and policing gender boundaries (Dutro, 2001/2002). The students readily agreed that girls have an easier time crossing gender boundaries, and that the term *tomboy* does not have negative connotations. However, terms associated with boys who cross the gender boundary, such as *sissy*, *girly*, *wimpy*, do have negative connotations. Also, the boys agreed that someone telling you that you were "acting like a girl" was an insult.



**Figure 4.1** Class constructed chart of gender stereotypes associated with all children, girls, and boys. The red line in the girls and boys sections separates answers given by the boys and girls in the class.

In this first week we also spent time discussing who decides what is classified as “normal” behavior for each gender. The students had many questions about why some actions are associated with boys and why others are associated with girls. They also wanted to know when and where these decisions happened and who made these decisions. This led to us creating a chart of what society insists it means to “act like a man” and/or “be ladylike” and who teaches children to behave in accordance with these predetermined norms (Figure 4.2). This chart highlighted the opposing views of traditional gender roles and norms (Table 4.3) with many parallel, yet opposite, behaviors listed for each category.



**Figure 4.2** Class created chart about 'Who decides?' gender rules in society.

**Table 4.3** Opposing responses from the 'Who decides?' chart

Act Like a Man	Be Ladylike
- don't cry	- can cry when hurt
-rough, tough, pushy, don't be soft	-quiet, still, soft, don't get messy, strict
-outdoors, build stuff, hard work	-inside, cooking, cleaning
-be responsible for own self	-help others
-drive the car, go to town, do more things	-do hair, make-up, fancy, dresses

When discussing the outside influences that impact their worldviews on gender roles and norms, both the girls and the boys listed family members, movies, and books; however, another opposing aspect became apparent, the girls were influenced by



princesses/Barbies and the boys identified with superheroes. My students' responses mirrored findings by Sheldon (2004) suggesting that it is socially necessary for females to appear feminine and research by French (1992) and Ruscher (2001) indicating that pervasive stereotyping in all aspects of diversity results in biased portrayals of individuals being normalized.

At the end of the week, we played a game in which I read a sentence and the students had to decide if it was a gender stereotype or not. If they thought it was, they put their hands on their heads; if they thought it was not a stereotype, they put their hands on their hips. In a regular learning setting I would have had the students stand up or sit down, but in the virtual setting, standing up lead to issues with headphone cords and laptops. Some examples of sentences I read are:

- Girls like to wear dresses.
- All boys like to play freeze tag.
- Some third graders like the color yellow.
- Nurses are always girls.
- Girls are scared of bugs.
- Sometimes girls like art class.
- Blue is a boy color.

This game was a good culmination of week one and allowed the students to express their growing understanding of gender stereotypes in an interactive way.

**NewsELA.** Each week one article was selected from NewsELA.com, an online district approved resource. This website's platform is designed around the idea that classrooms need more engaging content. Their content philosophy reflects this ideal:

Content manufactured for the classroom isn't cutting it. NewsELA content comes from the real world, about people and topics students relate to. We start with the world's best sources and carefully select only the content that is *most* representative, *most* engaging, and best for Culturally Responsive Teaching. Because when students read about things they're excited about, they learn to love learning for life. (NewsELA.com)

We read and discussed the articles each week in small groups (3-4 students) to allow each student more time and space to share their current thinking and new understanding. This often served as the interview time also, given the eLearning setting of the data collection period.

The article we read the first week was titled, "All-female Driving Team: Racing for Something Bigger than Wins," which was about a team of all female race car drivers and their quest to disrupt the gender stereotypes in their profession (Pruett, 2019). The discussion of this article resulted in some interesting, stereotypical comments that maintained and policed the gender boundaries (Dutro, 2001/2002):

Question from me: "Why do you think there are more male race car drivers than female drivers?"

Responses:

J.B.- "I think more people think boys are better at racing because...how do it I put it...boys are faster. I am trying to figure out how to describe it. Because in football and things with danger, there aren't girls; they try to avoid danger. Sometimes other cars bump into you, you can get stuck in the car, and there're fires."

C.D.- “Most girls I know are not interested in doing it, because it’s dangerous.”

A.W.- “In past generations, like back in the day, there was like a lot of boy racers. Now some girls wanted to enter the racing world, but it was full of boys.”

J.W.- “Because on the road when they are racing, it’s messy and girls don’t want to get messy when they are driving.”

L.T.- “Boys don’t think that girls are tough enough or prepared to do the racing.”

S.F.- “Boys want to keep it only boys.”

K.E.- “I just think that when it all started it was only normal for boys to do the driving, so now it is still normal. And girls don’t like to not be normal.”

A.T. – “I think that men are always like ‘I’m better than you’ and ‘I’ll beat you’ and they say, ‘I’ll show you how tough I am,’ so they drive cars and stuff. But girls aren’t like that, they aren’t like ‘I’m better than you and I’ll beat you driving this car one million miles per hour.’”

***Personality Collages.*** Students were all given a packet of magazines to use to make a personality collage. These collages depicted the students’ hobbies, interests, dreams, and favorites. We used these to not only get to know each other better, but also to further ideas about how their current worldviews aligned to stereotypical or counterstereotypical gender roles and norms. Some of the items we noticed on most of the girls’ collages were animals, sweet treats, flowers, fruits, and pinks/reds/purples. On the boys’ collages we noticed: cars, food, sports, outdoor activities, video games, and animals. Given the virtual learning setting, they worked on these individually, so the correlations were all discovered after they were finished. See Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4 for examples of the personality collages. This activity was listed as one of the favorites

of the entire curricular unit. Even though we had been learning together in the virtual setting for about seven weeks at this time, when they shared their collages with each other, it helped them to form more connections and commonalities in our classroom community.



**Figure 4.3 (girls) and Figure 4.4 (boys)** These figures are examples of the individually created personality collages.

**Read Alouds.** In week one, we read *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman (1991) and *Oliver Button is a Sissy* by Tomie dePaola (1979). Appendix G contains a full list of all read alouds used during data collection. Using the lens of gender norms and stereotypes that we are refining as a class, we created a class chart that reflected our growing understanding of what society has normalized as gender specific activities and behaviors in the books we were reading together (Figure 4.2) based on an idea used in prior classroom research by Hass (2017).

Book Title	What is being made normal?	What is being made different?	Who has the power to decide what is normal or different?	What is the conflict?	What action is taken, by whom, and what is the result?
<u>Amazing Grace</u>	Girls having girl roles in a play. Boys having boy roles in a play.	People trying out for any role they want.	Grace - classmates - teacher	Grace wants to try out for the role of Peter Pan. Ray says she can't because she is a girl!	Mr. and Mrs. Green remind Grace she can do/ be anything! She gets the role of Peter Pan because she was the best.
<u>Oliver Button is a Sissy</u>	Boys should act like 'boys' and do 'boy' activities - sports.	Boys liking to sing, dance, jump rope, and play dress up.	Oliver - parents - Mr. Leah	Oliver loves to dance. Dad wants him to play ball. Classmate picks on him.	Mom signed him up for dance class. He is so happy. Dad and classmates start to understand.
<u>William's Doll</u>	Boys should play sports. Boys should NOT play with dolls.	Boys playing with dolls to practice being fathers.	William - his dad - his brother - grandmother	William wants a doll, but his dad wants him to play basketball and build things. Father picked on him.	Grandmother buys William a doll and explains to his dad that he is practicing being a father.
<u>Angus All Aglow</u>	Boys don't wear sparkles, glittery shirts, jewelry.	Boys wearing bright, sparkling, glowing.	Angus - classmates - teacher	Angus loves sparkles, glittery, colorful things. Classmate picks on him.	Teacher gathers the kids and they make bracelets that are pink or blue.
<u>Pink is for Boys</u>	There are 'boy' colors and 'girl' colors.	All colors are for everyone.	Every person	People think pink is for girls and blue is for boys.	Bob reminds us every color is for everyone.
<u>Beautiful</u>	Girls are 'fudgier', prettier, and proper.	Girls playing in mud, doing science, cleaning up printer, and being messy.	Teacher - messenger children - boys - and the messenger	The girls are getting dirty and doing 'boy' activities.	Finally accepts them.
<u>Not All Princesses Dress in Pink</u>	Princesses are 'princess', proper, and fancy.	Princesses playing sports, using power tools, and getting dirty.	Each princess	The princesses want to do 'normal' things like sports, building, cleaning, and playing.	Mom tells them NO! so they do all the activities.
<u>The Boy with Pink Hair</u>	People usually have brown, black, red, or blonde hair.	Pink hair (natural)	classmates - parents - community	The boy with Pink Hair starts school and is picked on by the boys with the bad attitudes.	The girl with Purple Hair knows NO! and she tells everyone from the teacher. The boy with Pink Hair - says 'Glad to hear.'
<u>Jacob's New Dress</u>	Boys don't wear dresses.	Boys wear women's clothes. They are colorful, bright, etc.	Parents - Teacher - School - Community	Jacob plays with his new dress in school. He is picked on by the boys.	Mom helps him make a dress. Emily supports him at school and home.
<u>Red: A Crayon's Story</u>	Your behavior should match your gender/ outside expectations.	You should have to conform to society's ideals.	Red - teacher - parents - Bob	Red can't do 'red' things. Everyone has to help. Examples want him to be a successful red.	Boys told him to dress as a woman. He says that's what he likes. Then he's happy.

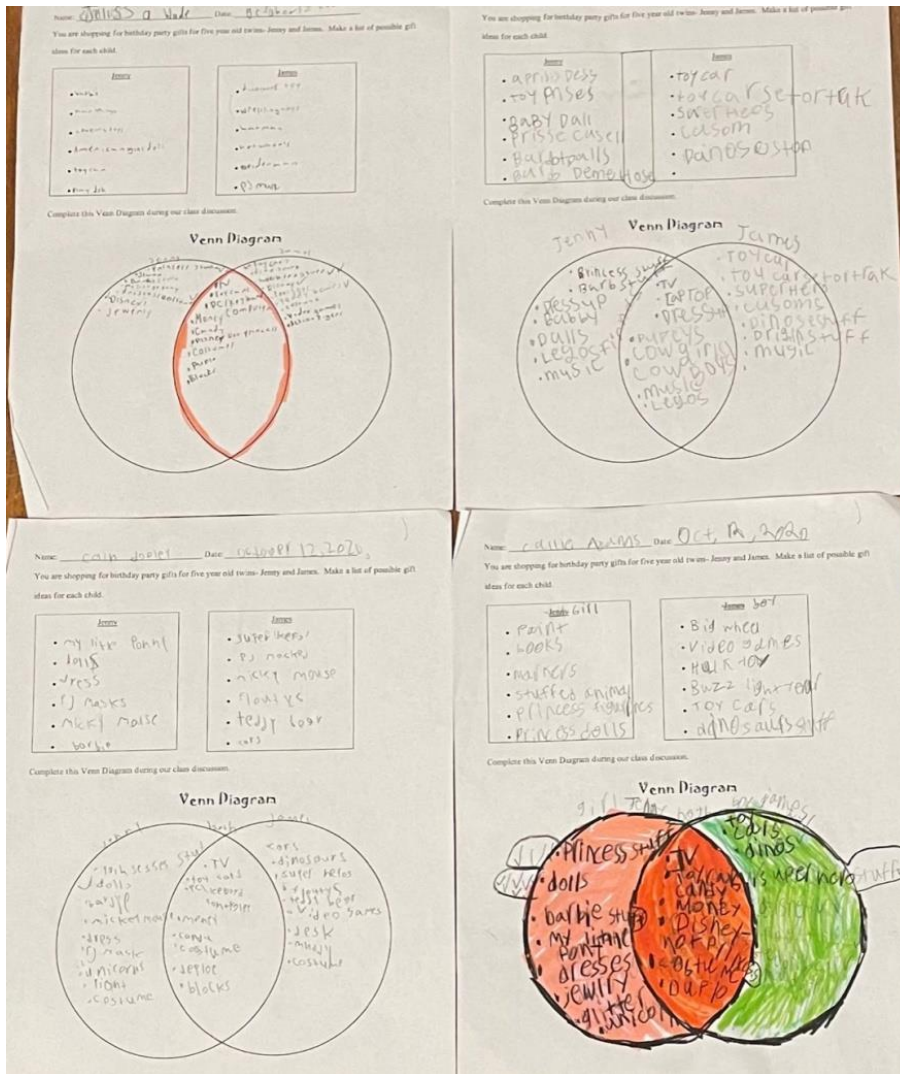
**Figure 4.5** Chart of read alouds: This chart tracked the normalcy highlighted and disrupted in selected children's literature. Books included in this chart are: *Amazing Grace* (1991), *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (1979), *William's Doll* (1972), *Angus All Aglow* (2018), *Pink is for Boys* (2018), *Beautiful* (2016), *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* (2010), *The Boy with Pink Hair* (2011), *Jacob's New Dress* (2014), and *Red: A Crayon's Story* (2015).

By recording what was being made normal, what was being made different, who had the power to decide what was normal and different, what conflicts arose from these decisions, and what were the resulting actions, the students had a common reference point for further discussions and support for their own meaning making regarding gender norms. In *Amazing Grace* (1991), the main character is a girl who wants the role of Peter Pan in an upcoming school play. *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (1979) features a boy main character who prefers activities traditionally associated with girls, such as dressing up, singing, and dancing. These stories were our entrance into how traditional gender norms can inhibit our hopes and dreams if we let them. Students were discussing the texts, but not yet sharing personal stories of when their own gender had impacted their decisions.

**Week Two.** The dates for data collection in week two ran from October 12, 2020 through October 16, 2020. During this week we completed several activities, read one

NewsELA article and three read alouds, watched one video, and completed brief semi-structured interviews. The overarching theme of this week was gender specific toys. This was a topic in which my third graders consider themselves experts, and it was briefly introduced in the read aloud from week one titled *Oliver Button is a Sissy (1979)*. This week was also when students starting tracking gender stereotypes they noticed outside of school (see Appendix D for student handout). Developing this connection between the curriculum and their everyday lives was crucial to forming a lasting impact on their worldviews concerning gender norms and roles.

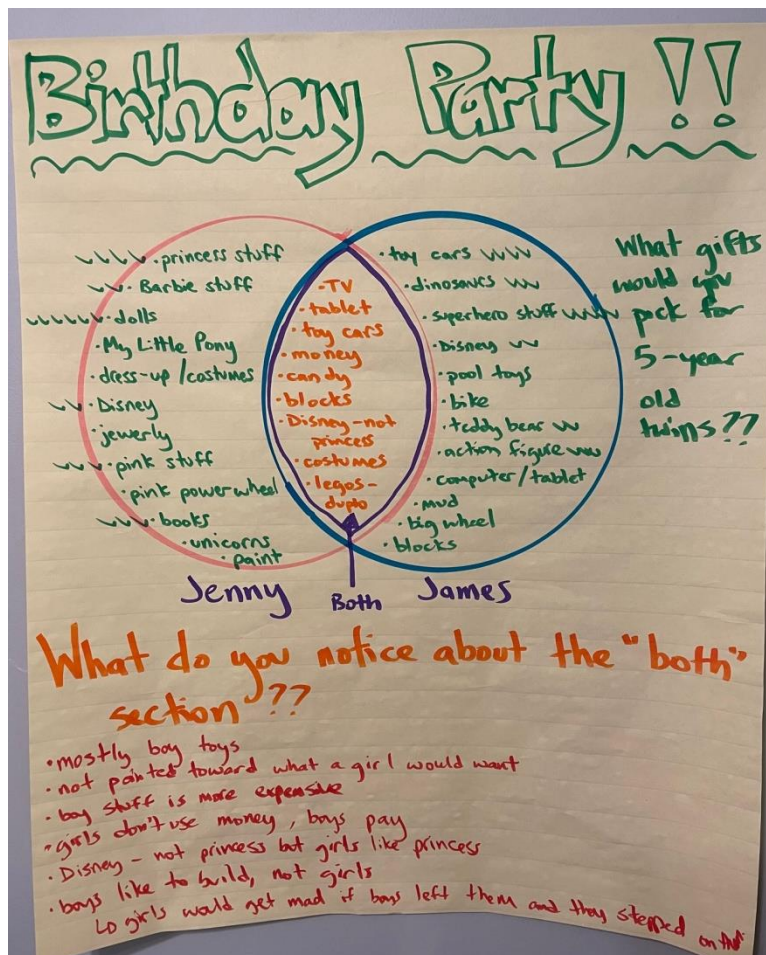
**Activities.** In the first activity of the week, the students were presented with the scenario of attending a birthday party for five-year-old twins, Jenny and James. The students made a list of possible toys they would buy each child (Appendix D for student handout). After students made their lists individually (Figure 4.6), we constructed a class chart of the ideas and made a Venn diagram to display our toy selections (Figure 4.7). The check marks on the Venn diagram represent the number of times a certain toy selection was mentioned on the students' individual lists. The overwhelming favorites for Jenny were dolls and princess items; for James the front runners were superhero items, toys cars, and dinosaurs.



**Figure 4.6** Individually created birthday party gift ideas and Venn diagrams

After we finished charting all the responses, I asked the students what they noticed about the middle section of the Venn diagram. It did not take them long to realize that the middle section was all toys that were traditionally considered toys for boys. During our discussion of this, the students agreed that it was more acceptable for girls to play with boy toys than vice versa.





**Figure 4.7** Class created chart of birthday gift ideas for girls, boys, and both. This chart also includes our class noticings about the middle section of the Venn diagram. Check marks on the chart represent the number of times that a certain gift idea was mentioned on a student's individual list.

**NewsELA.** The article selected for week two from NewsELA was titled "Do 'Boy Toys' and 'Girl Toys' have a Place in Fast Food Kids' Meals?" (Meyer, 2018). This article reviewed a national movement to eliminate gender specific toys in fast food kids' meals. Detailed in the article are facts that often toys designed for boys are action figures and building toys, whereas the toys for girls are often stuffed animals and pastel colored. By erasing the gender identifiers associated with kids' meal toys, children's imaginations would not be influenced or limited by these preconceived categories (Meyer, 2018). In our small group discussions following the reading of this article, some



of my students began to approve of the crossing of gender boundaries (Dutro, 2001/2002) when it came to toy selection. This is a change from week one when all students supported the policing of the gender boundary for race car drivers. Some of the comments from week two:

E.G.- “Girls can play with hot wheel cars, or Legos... whatever they want!!”

J.B.- “If the girl toy was art supplies, I would pick it. I love art. I wouldn’t care if it was in a pink container.”

J.W.- “They should pull up a big collection, like a toy map, and kids can pick whatever toy they want with their meal. It shouldn’t be boy and girl stuff separated.”

S.F.- “Toys should be equal, like people. They shouldn’t be for just girls or boys; they should be for both genders.”

L.T.- “You might be someone, like a girl who likes boy toys, and that’s okay. Even if someone else calls you weird because of that, it’s just their opinion. It doesn’t have to be your opinion of yourself too.”

A.T.- “They should change the law about this. If a girl wants a boy toy or a boy wants a girl toy, they should get that pick. I like the rule of being able to pick.”

**Read Alouds.** In week two, our selected read alouds were *William’s Doll* (1972) by Charlotte Zolotow, *Angus All Aglow* (2018) by Heather Smith, and *Pink is for Boys* (2018) by Robb Pearlman. After each read aloud, we again charted what activities were being normalized, what activities were being categorized as different, who was in the position of power making these decisions, and how/if the conflict was resolved.

*William’s Doll* (1972) was written almost 50 years ago, and was one of the first children’s texts to tackle the issue of gender stereotypes. As a class we discussed why it

is socially acceptable for boys to play with action figures, such as G.I. Joe or super heroes, but not dolls. Responses included various gender stereotypes:

- *Action figures have more muscles.*
- *The ones for boys can act violent and be tough.*
- *Action figures don't normally have make-up or hair you can brush.*
- *There aren't a lot of dolls that are boys.*
- *It's just weird that someone a long, long time ago decided what was going to be normal and now everyone still goes along with it.*

This book fit well in this week of data collection, since our theme was gender specific toys. *Angus All Aglow* (2018) is a story about acceptance and friendship that focuses on Angus's love of sparkly, shiny items. Angus, with the help of a friend, learns to navigate the effects of his nontraditional choice, i.e., wearing his grandmother's sparkly necklace to school. It was after this book that my students started to notice that in our read alouds, whenever a boy was crossing the gender lines, a girl was the character who supported his choice. Also, they began to comment on how it is more acceptable for a girl to be a *tomboy* than it is to be a *girly boy*. The final read aloud for week two, *Pink is for Boys* (2018), served as a reminder to my students that their lives are not color coded based on their gender. The idea that there are no 'boy colors or girl colors' was widely and readily accepted by all my students.

**Video.** This week I decided to show my students a short video that paired well with our theme of gender specific toys. This video was part of an experiment conducted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in which adults interact with young children (approximately 1-2 years old) in an area filled with toys. The researchers were

investigating what toys the adult would select to engage individual children. What the adult volunteers did not know was that the child's outfit did not always match their gender; sometimes the children would be dressed as girls and sometimes as boys. Depending on the *assumed* gender of the child, overwhelmingly the adults offered the children they perceived to be girls soft toys and dolls; however, the same child, when dressed as a boy, was offered toys that encouraged spatial awareness or physical awareness. These biases were shown from both male and female adult volunteers in the experiment. What my students mostly commented on after this video was that the young children did not seem to have a preference as to what toys they were playing with, which resulted in my students deciding babies are born not knowing the gender stereotypes. We discussed that young children are taught them as they grow up due to the fact that adults in their lives make the decisions to buy them toys are that traditionally associated with their gender, which thereby perpetuates the stereotype.

***Interviews.*** I wanted the interviews to be as authentic and organic as possible; therefore, I conducted them during my scheduled small group times in ELA. This allowed me to capitalize on the students' established group norms and developed comfort levels, and given the virtual learning setting, it helped me to adhere to screen time limits. At this point in the unit students mainly commented on how they knew about the stereotypes before our discussions, but now they understood them better and were seeing them everywhere. They also focused on there being more books about boys breaking gender stereotypes than girls. During this round of interviews, one student became emotional about the existence of gender stereotypes and angrily stated, "Why do we even have gender stereotypes? They are horrible things!" Her fellow group members readily

agreed and voiced their support, which lead to a further discussion about why they exist and how to respond to them. One group member asked, “Well, we know they are here, but can we change them?” My students’ worldviews are being challenged at this point, but they are not sure how to internally and externally reflect this impact.

**Week Three.** The third week of the unit spanned October 19-23, 2020 and included several activities, a NewsELA article, two read alouds, and story writing. This week’s materials continued to push the students’ personal connections to stereotypes while allowing them space to challenge their preconceived worldviews.

**Activities.** We started this week by using the Gender Scale handout (Appendix D). During this activity students placed various hobbies, items, and jobs on a scaled line that ranged from feminine on the left to masculine on the right; their chosen placements represented how feminine or masculine they considered each mentioned thing (Figure 4.8). Examples included:

- Driving
- Cooking
- Glitter
- Rescuing
- Computers
- Diet drinks

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: 10-20-2000

### Gender Scale

Place the activities we discuss in class on the gender scale below. Then answer the questions at the bottom.

Pick one activity you placed near the feminine end and explain why you put it there.

glitter because glitter is fancy and stereotypical  
girls are fancy

Pick one activity you placed near the masculine end and explain why you put it there.

green is just because that is a stereotypical color  
for boys

Pick one activity you placed near the middle and explain why you put it there.

diet drinks because anyone can drink that  
anything they want

---

### Gender Scale

Place the activities we discuss in class on the gender scale below. Then answer the questions at the bottom.

Pick one activity you placed near the feminine end and explain why you put it there.

I didn't put one there because stereotypes are not  
right

Pick one activity you placed near the masculine end and explain why you put it there.

I didn't put one there because stereotypes are  
not right

Pick one activity you placed near the middle and explain why you put it there.

I placed all things there because people can  
be anything they want

**Figure 4.8** Student work examples from the Gender Scale class activity.

After the students completed the scale, they answered a few questions about the placements they selected. Within the class responses were some that adhered to gender stereotypes:

- *Rescuing is manly because boys are stronger*
- *Cooking is feminine because my dad always gets take out*
- *Glitter is feminine because girls like shiny things*
- *Driving is for boys because my dad always drives*

However, there were also students who expressed other views:

- *I didn't put anything there [feminine end] because stereotypes are not right*
- *I placed all things there [middle] because people can be anything they want*
- *[Masculine end] green just because that is a stereotypical color for boys*
- *[Middle] Diet drinks because anyone can drink anything they want*

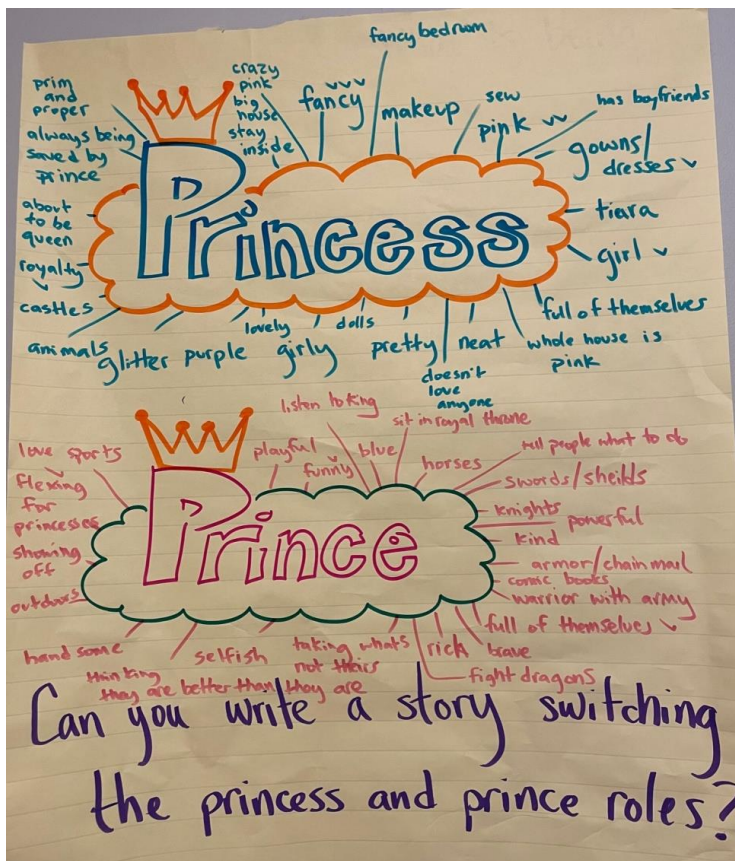
In week three we also tackled one of the most popular and prevalent gender stereotypes in traditional media: the princess. The notion of the ideal princess and her impact on my students, especially my girls, had already come up in the week one during the “Who decides?” activity and week two during the “Birthday Party” activity, as well as other times during class discussions. We created a class chart showing activities and attributes associated with both princesses and princes (Figure 4.9). Some of the items suggested for a princess were:

- *Fancy, neat, pretty, girly, lovely*
- *Prim and proper*
- *Always being saved by the prince*
- *Stays inside*
- *Whole house is pink*
- *Tiaras, dresses, gowns, makeup, glitter*
- *About to be queen*
- *Pink and purple*

Some items listed for the prince were:

- *Brave, funny, handsome, playful, powerful, rich, kind*
- *Fights dragons*

- Warrior with an army, swords, chain mail, knights, armor, and shields
- Showing off, flexing for princesses
- Telling people what to do
- Full of themselves
- Sits in the royal throne
- Listens to the king



**Figure 4.9** Class created chart showing descriptors for a princess and a prince.

As evidenced from these lists, the gender stereotypes are very apparent with roles of the princess and prince. When I asked the students where they learned about princesses and princes, they said movies, shows, books, posters, and toys.

After completing the chart, the students wrote short stories switching the roles of the stereotypical princess and prince (Figure 4.10). This activity resulted in lots of giggles and smiles while writing and sharing their stories. Many students returned to this prompt on several different occasions during free writing time to continue their stories or start new ones with the same concept. Some of the reversals in the stories included the prince being stuck in the tower needing to be rescued, the princess having muscles and an army, the princess fighting a dragon to save the prince, the prince wearing pink, the prince having to stay inside and sew while the princess played sports, and the prince being trapped in a volcano. One student started her story with:

You've heard of 'Once Upon a Time,' well that should really be 'Once Upon a Stereotype.' Let me tell you the real story, it all begins with a princess doing exactly what she pleases, instead of what everyone else thinks she should.

Another student began his story in the following way:

Prince: Help! Help! I am going to fall! Somebody please help me!

Princess: Don't worry. We will save you. There you are down safely. What's your name and where are you supposed to be?

Prince: My name is Prince Mike and I'm supposed to be at football practice, but some bullies wedgied me up here.

Princess: Oh no! That must have felt horrible.

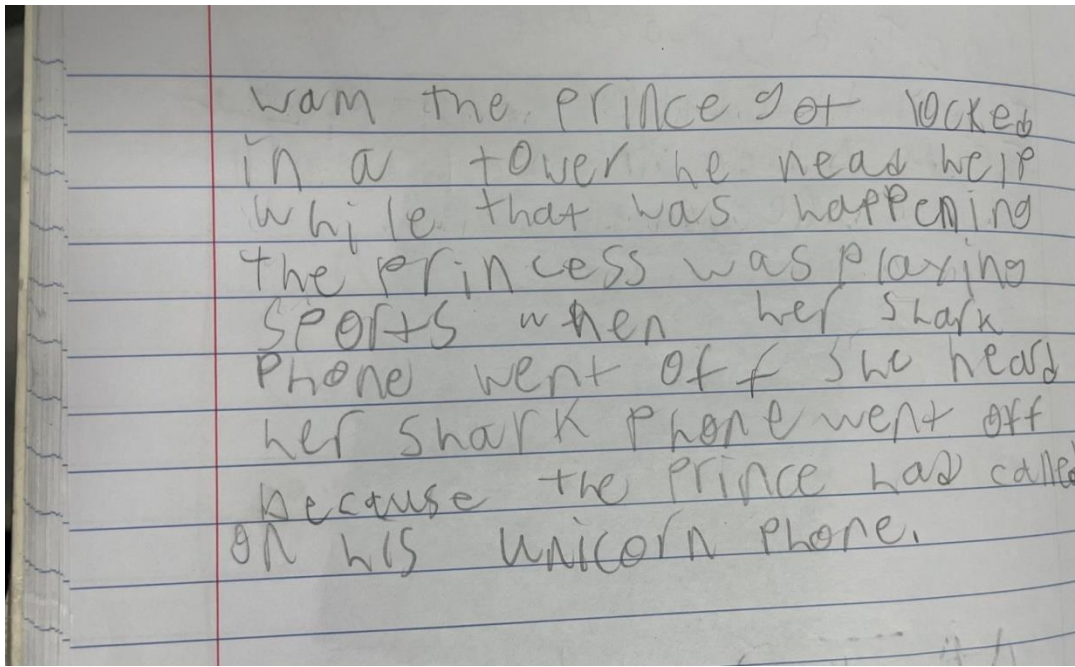
Prince: It did, but thank you for saving me.

Princess: You're welcome. Girls out.

During the virtual learning phase of this school year, many students filled their first writing journal. Given this, I was unable to collect many hard copies of this writing



activity. The above listed examples were transcribed from the Microsoft Stream video recorded that day.



**Figure 4.10** Student writing example of switching the princess and prince roles.

**NewsELA.** This week we used an article by Stanley-Becker (2019) titled, “Study: Americans Take the Pain of Girls Less Seriously than that of Boys.” The study highlighted the research findings that adult Americans judge the amount of pain a child is in based on the gender of the child; to do this the researchers showed adult participants a video of a neutrally dressed, five-year-old child, either known as Samuel or Samantha, getting a finger prick in a doctor’s office. Overall, based on the child’s reaction to the finger prick, when the child was assumed to be a boy, the adults rated his pain level higher than when the child was assumed to be a girl. Our small group discussions after reading this article focused on how adults’ reactions to children being hurt dictates how they handle the pain and the care they receive. Here are some of the comments from individual students:

E.Z.- “Adults think boys are tough, so if boys say something hurts... you know... it probably does.”

J.B.- “Girls don’t hurt more or less; girls are just louder about it. I’m not saying girls over-react, they just talk more. This is all just stereotypes! Boys can cry, I cry sometimes.”

C.D.- “This article is just not true in real life. Girls and boys hurt the same.”

J.D.- “It’s opposite to me. When I fell down at day care, the teacher told me to ‘walk it off,’ but when a girl fell the next day, she took her to the nurse.”

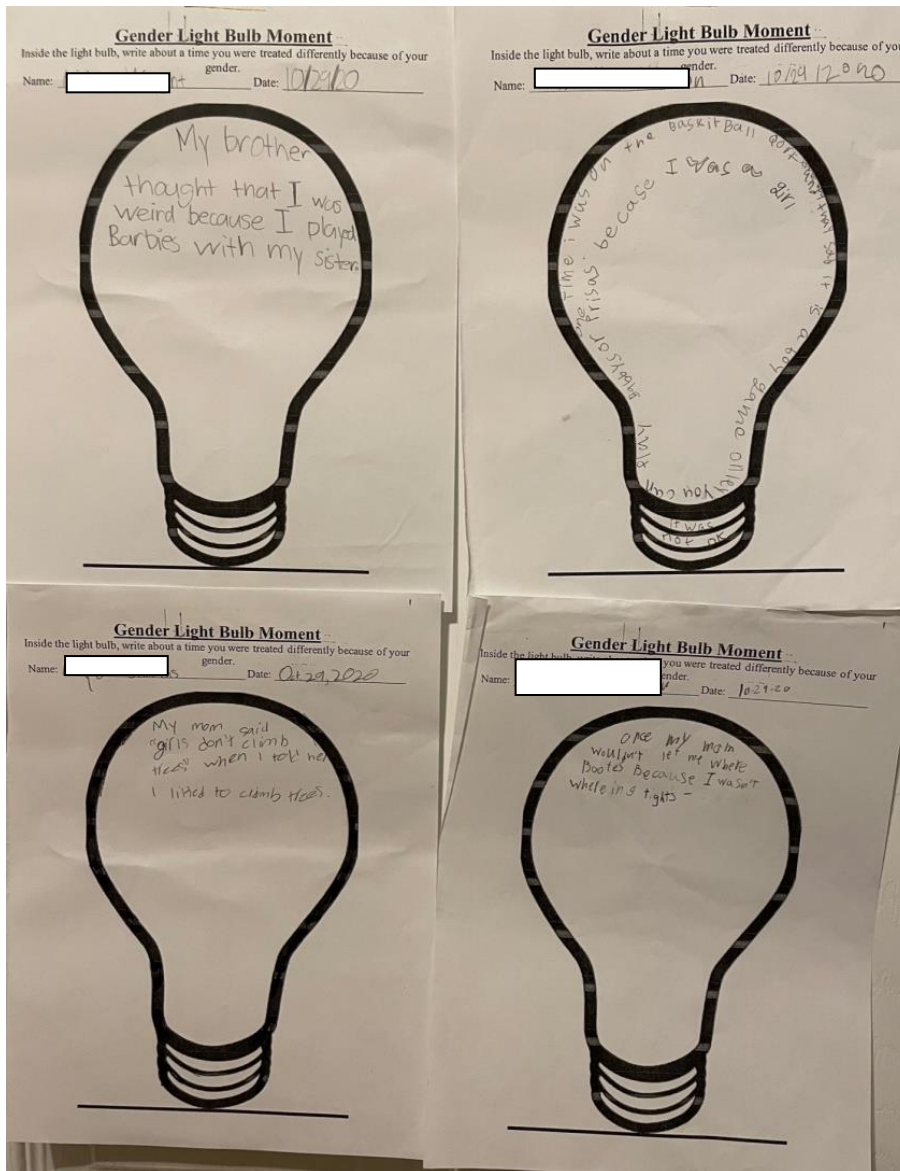
**Read Alouds.** The two read aloud selected for week three were *Beautiful* (2016) by Stacy McAnulty and *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* (2010) by Jane Yolen and Heidi Stemple. Both books are written to convey a message of empowerment to girls; they depict girls playing in the mud, doing science experiments, dressing up as pirates, enjoying sports, and other activities traditionally associated with boys. Since most of our books in the first two weeks focused on boys crossing the gender boundaries, these books served as a reminder that girls also have unlimited potential and access to endless possibilities.

**Week Four.** The final week of the “Shattering the Glass Slipper” unit lasted from October 23-27, 2020. During this week the students had another writing assignment, shared stereotypes they encounter in their own lives, read a NewsELA article and three read alouds, had their final interview time, and completed the post-survey. The main focus of this week was allowing the students the time to notice and name gender stereotypes that they encountered in their lives outside of school. This was also a way to

see the growth they were experiencing during this unit regarding their knowledge of gender stereotypes and recognition of gender stereotypes.

**Activities.** The first activity for this week was a reflection activity in which the students wrote about a time they were treated differently because of their gender (Appendix D and Figure 4.11). Some of their examples included:

- *At my old school a group of girls were playing tag and I wanted to play, but they said boys were disgusting. That made me feel sad and I had no tag to play.*
- *My mom said I couldn't have short hair even if I wanted it.*
- *My brother thought I was weird because I played Barbies with my sister.*
- *Once my mom wouldn't let me wear boots because I wasn't wearing tights.*
- *My neighbor gave me and my sister juice in princess cups and the boys juice in Star Wars cups.*
- *My mom said, "Girls don't climb trees," when I told her I liked to climb trees.*
- *My cousin didn't want the pink popsicle. He said it was for girls. I ate it.*
- *I told my mom I wanted to go into the Army when I grow up, but she said that was a job for boys.*
- *My grandma only gets me dolls for Christmas, even when I asked for a basketball.*



**Figure 4.11** Student reflections on gender stereotypes impacting their own lives

Recognizing gender stereotypes in their lives allowed my students to personalize the information we were talking about in class. It also opened their eyes to the fact that stereotypes are not just things in books, articles, and videos that are happening to other people. This activity also gave us the opportunity to discuss who was perpetuating the gender stereotypes in their lives, which linked back to our discussions about who teaches children how to act “like a girl” or “like a boy.”

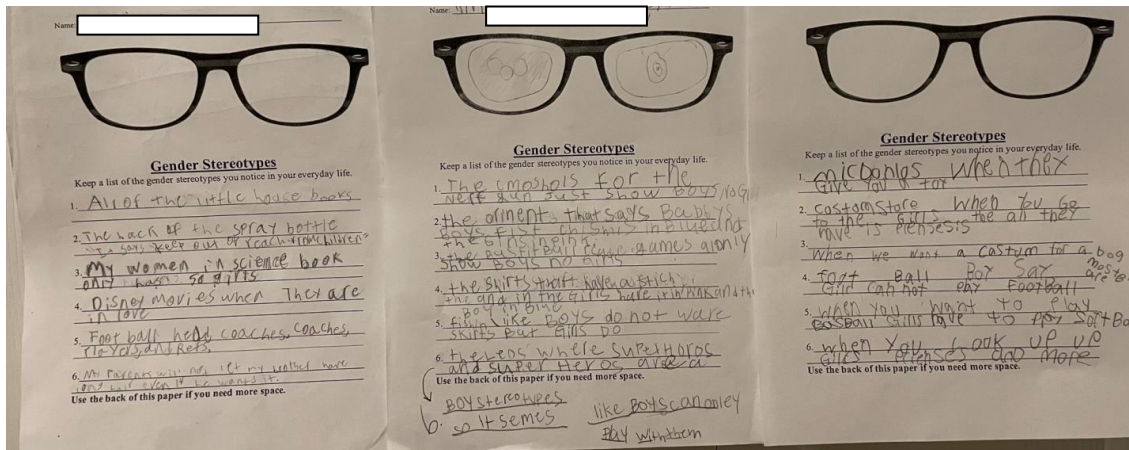
The reflection activity partnered well with an ongoing activity that we completed this week in which the students shared the lists of stereotypes they were individually compiling (Appendix D). The stereotypes they were noticing and listing came from television commercials, books, sports, friends, family, and various other forms of influence (Figure 4.12). Examples from their lists include:

- *Costumes stores- when you go to the girls' section, it is all princesses.*
- *Boys play baseball and girls play softball.*
- *The boys say girls cannot play football.*
- *The commercials for Nerf guns show boys mostly.*
- *The ornaments that say "Baby's First Christmas" are blue for boys and pink for girls.*

In these lists they also continued questioning when stereotypes challenged their current worldviews:

- *What about holding the door for girls? Or letting girls go first?*
- *My dad always drives and pays. Is that what boys are supposed to do?*
- *Girls are princesses, and boys are knights. What if I want to be the dragon?*
- *Boys can't act sweet, but really that's just us being nice.*
- *Girls don't need to be saved all the time.*
- *Why do men get to do all the good stuff, and women have to cook and clean?*
- *Do girls always have to raise the kids?*
- *How come women had to fight for their rights, like voting, but men just got them?*
- *Boys don't like to be told what to do. Do girls?*

When we discussed their lists, the students were grappling with the ideas that presented a truth which was contrary to what they thought before starting the unit. They were repeatedly surprised at how common gender stereotypes were in advertisements and media.



**Figure 4.12** Individually created lists of gender stereotypes students noticed throughout the unit.

**NewsELA.** The final article for this unit was “New Zealand School Abolishes Gendered Uniforms” by Eleanor Ainge Roy (2017). The school where I teach requires students to wear uniforms; therefore, the connection to this article was immediate and personal for the students. The article discusses how the girls at a New Zealand school found it to be unfair that they had to wear kilts (skirts) to school every day when the boys could wear shorts or trousers. Ultimately the school agreed that the policy was archaic and “reinforced traditional and outdated gender stereotypes” (Roy, 2017, para. 3). They changed the uniform policy to be more accepting of diversity, and it now includes five options that either boys or girls can wear: shorts, long shorts, kilts, trousers, or culottes. After reading this article, some of my students’ responses were:

C.D.- “Every school I know with a uniform has a skirt. If you think about boys wearing them, it doesn’t seem weird, but if you actually saw one wearing a skirt it might.

What I like mostly about this article is that the school said they wanted kids to wear what they wanted and to be comfortable with it.”

J.B.- “I would wear a dress if my dad would let me. I think it would be cooler in hot weather.”

J. W.- “If girls here had to wear skirts every day, I would want it to change too.”

A.W.- “I’ve seen men wearing kilts at the St. Patrick’s Day Festival. I think they are cool!”

L.T.- “I never thought about how girls at our school can wear the plaid jumpers, but boys really don’t have a plaid choice.”

J.B.- “Girls always get more choice, just think about the variety of shoes... they got tennis shoes, they got high heels, they can wear slides, they can wear loafers. They can wear anything they want.”

E.R.- “I don’t think I would wear a skirt, but having the choice seems fine.”

**Read Alouds.** The following three read alouds rounded out the “Shattering the Glass Slipper” unit: *The Boy with Pink Hair* (2011) by Perez Hilton, *Jacob’s New Dress* (2014) by Sarah and Ian Hoffman, and *Red: A Crayon’s Story* (2015) by Michael Hall. After reading *The Boy with Pink Hair* (2011), the class discussed times when they were judged by others for being different and how it made them feel. *Jacob’s New Dress* (2014) connected to our NewELA article from this week. This topic provided a platform for the students to continue their discussion on gender specific clothing. One overarching theme of the books we read in this unit was “Be yourself and trust yourself,” which again

applies to *Red: A Crayon's Story* (2015). This book's main character is a blue crayon with a red wrapper; since he is red on the outside, everyone expects him to behave in a ways typical of red crayons, such as coloring strawberries and hearts. Once he figures out that he is actually blue, with the help of a friend, his life is much better. We related that to our gender stereotypes study by connecting the obstacles Red faces with that of our other main characters in the read alouds selected for this unit.

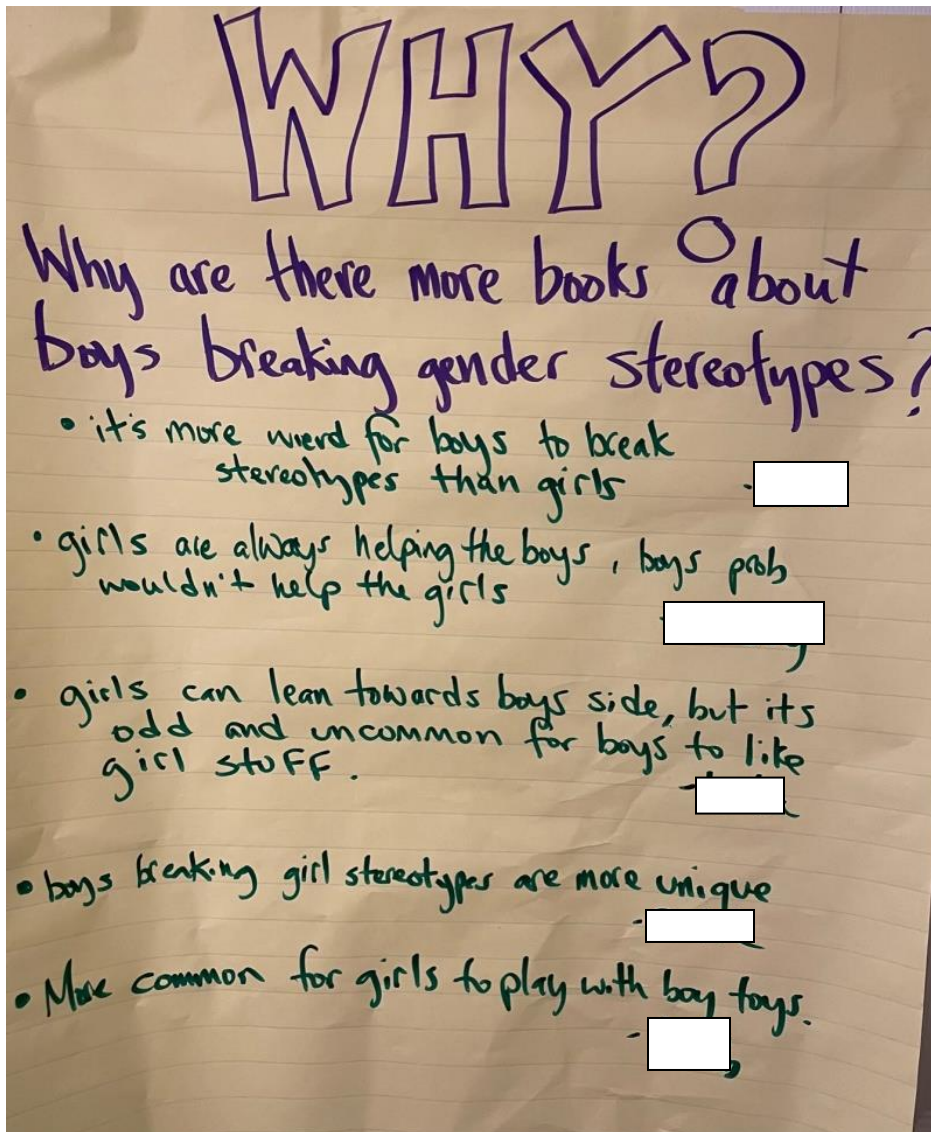
**Interviews.** During our interview time, the students mainly talked about the differences between how society views boys crossing the gender boundaries differently than girls crossing the gender boundary. A group asked me to make a chart about why there are more books about boys acting in counterstereotypical ways than girls (Figure 4.13). One conclusion the students repeatedly came back to was that in most of our books when a boy character was acting in a non-stereotypical way there was a girl character there to support his decisions. This connection resulted in further comments about how boys are less accepting of counterstereotypical behaviors from peers than are girls. When we were discussing who makes the decisions for what is socially acceptable boy behaviors and girl behaviors, here are some of the comments:

J.B.- "I think society says, 'we're going to make fun of you if you play with dolls and wear glittery shoes,' so then boys just don't do that stuff because no one likes being made fun of."

C.D.- "It seems that a long time ago there were just a bunch of girls who liked one thing and a bunch of boys who liked another thing, so then society just said 'oh, if you're a girl you have to play with this stuff and boys will always play with this other stuff. So maybe that's just what happened.'"



L.T.- “I think back like in the year 12 or year 15, there was this man that everyone wanted to be like, so all the things he did and liked became the boy stereotypes. Then there was this lady who was fancy and girly, so all the stuff she did started the girl stereotypes.”



**Figure 4.13** Class created chart about main characters in read alouds.

**Post-Survey.** On the final day of the “Shattering the Glass Slipper” unit, I administered the post-survey through the Microsoft Forms platform; it was identical to the pre-survey in question order, question wording, and color theme. To gauge whether

or not the designed curricular unit had an impact on my students, I was looking for a deeper understanding of stereotypes in their open ended questions at the beginning of the survey, specifically the last question that asked, “What is a gender stereotype?,” and a broadened acceptance of what both genders could do in the multiple choice questions relating to professions and behaviors or abilities. Table 4.4 lists the open-ended questions and some sample responses. After reviewing these answers, I noted the most growth in their responses to the final open-ended question when compared to their pre-survey answers.

**Table 4.4** *Open-ended questions and sample answers from the post-survey*

Open-ended Questions from pre-survey	Sample Answers
What do you know about gender?	<p>-I know there are differences between boys and girls, and sometimes we act opposite.</p> <p>-I know there are boys and girls, and society tells us to act differently.</p> <p>-It's if you're a boy or a girl. Some people get treated differently because of their gender.</p> <p>-It is about what society has decided for boys and girls, so like girls like pink and glitter and boys like blue and Minecraft.</p> <p>-I know that there are two types- male and female. The reason there are 2 types is because females have xx DNA and male have xy DNA. Also people can be transgender if they are transgender they were born male but feel female or they were born female and feel male enough to change gender.</p> <p>-There are 2 types of genders there is female and male.</p>


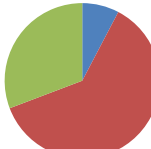


<p>Who taught you how to act like a boy or act like a girl?</p>	<p>-My mom and dad taught me.</p> <p>-My dad</p> <p>-Nobody taught me, I just know how to act like a girl.</p> <p>-My mom and nana showed me.</p> <p>-My dad taught me how to act like a boy.</p> <p>-Nobody really, I just happened to like what a boy should like.</p>
<p>What does it mean to act like a boy?</p>	<p>-To act like a stereotypical boy means to be rough, messy, sporty, and love the outdoors.</p> <p>-Some boys are rough and dirty, some boys are nice and clean.</p> <p>-Acting like a boy is to be tough and take responsibility.</p> <p>-It means to be active and hang out with each other, and it also means to do boy stuff.</p> <p>-There are certain things most boys do, but they do not all have to do them.</p>
<p>What does it mean to act like a girl?</p>	<p>-To act like a stereotypical girl means to be fancy, pretty, wear dresses, and love cute things.</p> <p>-Sometimes they are soft. Some girls are rough. They can be dirty and clean.</p> <p>-It means to be very fancy and very nice.</p> <p>-Girls are quiet, bright, and like make-up.</p> <p>-It means to be calm, sweet, and pretty.</p>

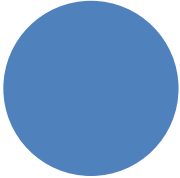
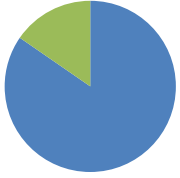
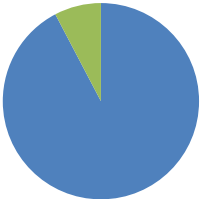
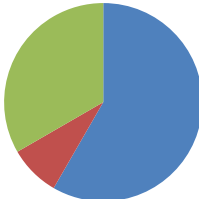
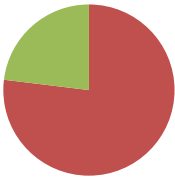
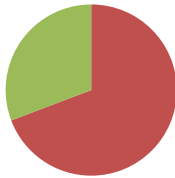
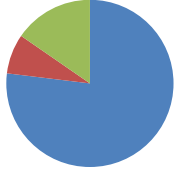
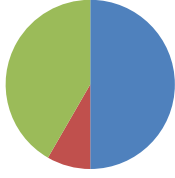
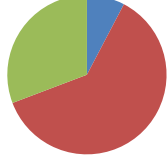
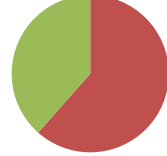
	<p>-There are things that a lot of girls I know like to do, but not all girls have to do the same things.</p>
<p>What is a gender stereotype? Have you experienced any?</p>	<p>-It's like when they ask if you want a girl toy or a boy toy with your Happy Meal.</p> <p>-A gender stereotype is when you act like society says a boy or a girl should. And I have not experienced any.</p> <p>-A gender stereotype is a way society thinks what boys and girls do, which is wrong.</p> <p>-A gender stereotype is when someone says only girls can play with this and that or a boy can't play with that.</p> <p>-It is something you think all girls or all boys like.</p> <p>-It's when a boy has to do boy stuff and a girl has to do girl stuff.</p> <p>-Yes, when it was my birthday we went to Adrenaline with my friends and at dodge ball I got hit in the head by a huge kid. He was saying I was a girl because I said "ow."</p> <p>-A gender stereotype is a lie about how to act.</p> <p>-A gender stereotype is a thing that girls can't do because they're girls or boys can't do because they're boys. My mom said I could not have short hair even if I wanted it.</p>

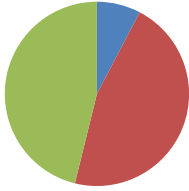
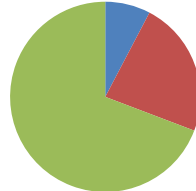
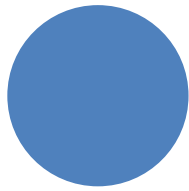
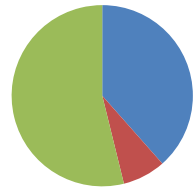
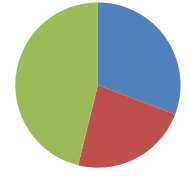
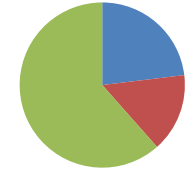
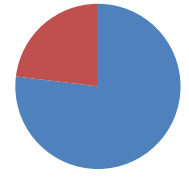
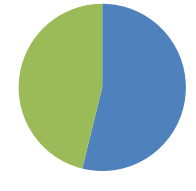
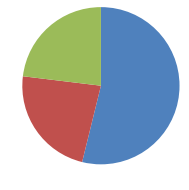
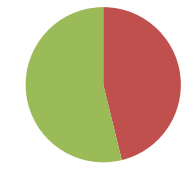
The following table shows the comparison between the pre- and post-survey for every multiple choice question (Table 4.5). In every category, except one, the students

selected the “Both” or “Both Equally” options more in the post-survey when compared to the pre-survey. This indicated that their initial worldviews about gender roles and norms were more binary in nature and aligned with traditional gender expectations prior to the implementation of the curricular unit. The growing awareness and knowledge concerning gender stereotypes was expressed in their increased acknowledgment of both genders being capable of various professions, abilities, and behaviors. The only category that did not show an increase or decrease in the “Both Equally” section was “Being a Friend.” On both the pre- and post-survey all students selected “Both Equally” for this question.

**Table 4.5** *Comparison of the pre- and post-survey answers*

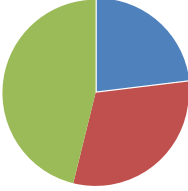
Color Code: Blue = Male/Boy, Red = Female/Girl, Green = Both Equally	
Professional Roles	
Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
<p><b>The hair stylist finished all the braids.</b></p>  <p>■ Male ■ Female ■ Both</p>	<p><b>The hair stylist finished all the braids.</b></p>  <p>■ Male ■ Female ■ Both</p>
<p><b>The doctor just operated on someone who was in a car crash.</b></p>  <p>■ Male ■ Female ■ Both</p>	<p><b>The doctor just operated on someone who was in a car crash.</b></p>  <p>■ Male ■ Female ■ Both</p>

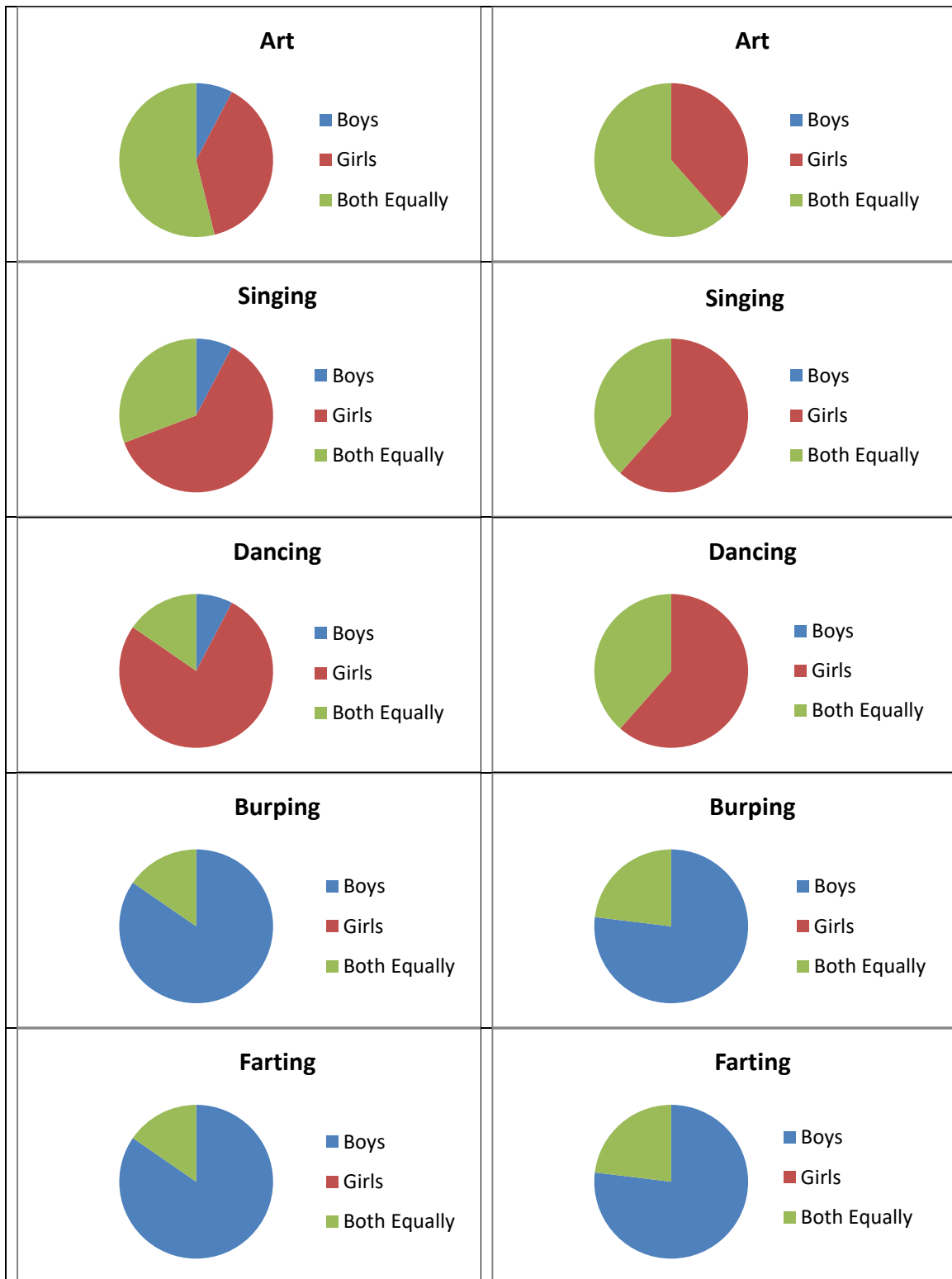
<p><b>The football player scored the game winning touchdown.</b></p>  <p>■ Male ■ Female ■ Both</p>	<p><b>The football player scored the game winning touchdown.</b></p>  <p>■ Male ■ Female ■ Both</p>
<p><b>The mechanic fixed the engine.</b></p>  <p>■ Male ■ Female ■ Both</p>	<p><b>The mechanic fixed the engine.</b></p>  <p>■ Male ■ Female ■ Both</p>
<p><b>The teacher gave all the students extra credit.</b></p>  <p>■ Male ■ Female ■ Both</p>	<p><b>The teacher gave all the students extra credit.</b></p>  <p>■ Male ■ Female ■ Both</p>
<p><b>The astronaut went to outer space.</b></p>  <p>■ Male ■ Female ■ Both</p>	<p><b>The astronaut went to outer space.</b></p>  <p>■ Male ■ Female ■ Both</p>
<p><b>The cafeteria worker cooked several pizzas.</b></p>  <p>■ Male ■ Female ■ Both</p>	<p><b>The cafeteria worker cooked several pizzas.</b></p>  <p>■ Male ■ Female ■ Both</p>

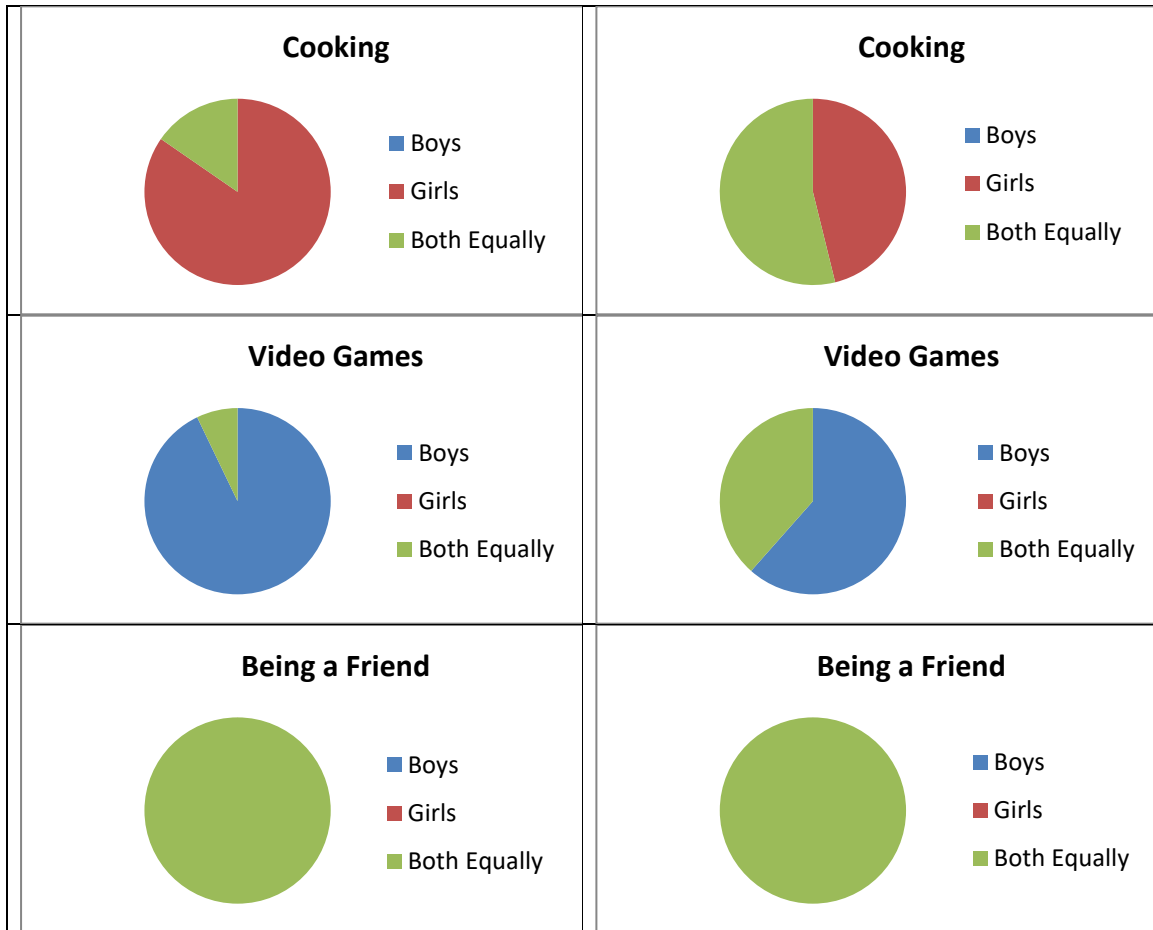
<p><b>The parent cooked dinner.</b></p>  <p> <span>■ Male</span>  <span>■ Female</span>  <span>■ Both</span> </p>	<p><b>The parent cooked dinner.</b></p>  <p> <span>■ Male</span>  <span>■ Female</span>  <span>■ Both</span> </p>
<p><b>The firefighter jumped on the big truck.</b></p>  <p> <span>■ Male</span>  <span>■ Female</span>  <span>■ Both</span> </p>	<p><b>The firefighter jumped on the big truck.</b></p>  <p> <span>■ Male</span>  <span>■ Female</span>  <span>■ Both</span> </p>
<p><b>The pilot landed the plane safely.</b></p>  <p> <span>■ Male</span>  <span>■ Female</span>  <span>■ Both</span> </p>	<p><b>The pilot landed the plane safely.</b></p>  <p> <span>■ Male</span>  <span>■ Female</span>  <span>■ Both</span> </p>
<p><b>The basketbal player shot a free throw.</b></p>  <p> <span>■ Male</span>  <span>■ Female</span>  <span>■ Both</span> </p>	<p><b>The basketbal player shot a free throw.</b></p>  <p> <span>■ Male</span>  <span>■ Female</span>  <span>■ Both</span> </p>
<p><b>The lawyer met with a new client.</b></p>  <p> <span>■ Male</span>  <span>■ Female</span>  <span>■ Both</span> </p>	<p><b>The lawyer met with a new client.</b></p>  <p> <span>■ Male</span>  <span>■ Female</span>  <span>■ Both</span> </p>

<p><b>The college student had to study for a test.</b></p> <p>Male Female Both</p>	<p><b>The college student had to study for a test.</b></p> <p>Male Female Both</p>
<p><b>The principal read a book to the class.</b></p> <p>Male Female Both</p>	<p><b>The principal read a book to the class.</b></p> <p>Male Female Both</p>
<p><b>The singer recorded a song.</b></p> <p>Male Female Both</p>	<p><b>The singer recorded a song.</b></p> <p>Male Female Both</p>
<p><b>The trash collector wheeled the garbage can to the curb.</b></p> <p>Male Female Both</p>	<p><b>The trash collector wheeled the garbage can to the curb.</b></p> <p>Male Female Both</p>
<p><b>The police officer stopped traffic for the parade.</b></p> <p>Male Female Both</p>	<p><b>The police officer stopped traffic for the parade.</b></p> <p>Male Female Both</p>



Abilities and Behaviors	
Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
<p><b>Math</b></p>  <p> <span>Boys</span>  <span>Girls</span>  <span>Both Equally</span> </p>	<p><b>Math</b></p>  <p> <span>Boys</span>  <span>Girls</span>  <span>Both Equally</span> </p>
<p><b>Reading</b></p>  <p> <span>Boys</span>  <span>Girls</span>  <span>Both Equally</span> </p>	<p><b>Reading</b></p>  <p> <span>Boys</span>  <span>Girls</span>  <span>Both Equally</span> </p>
<p><b>Science</b></p>  <p> <span>Boys</span>  <span>Girls</span>  <span>Both Equally</span> </p>	<p><b>Science</b></p>  <p> <span>Boys</span>  <span>Girls</span>  <span>Both Equally</span> </p>
<p><b>Social Studies</b></p>  <p> <span>Boys</span>  <span>Girls</span>  <span>Both Equally</span> </p>	<p><b>Social Studies</b></p>  <p> <span>Boys</span>  <span>Girls</span>  <span>Both Equally</span> </p>
<p><b>Sports</b></p>  <p> <span>Boys</span>  <span>Girls</span>  <span>Both Equally</span> </p>	<p><b>Sports</b></p>  <p> <span>Boys</span>  <span>Girls</span>  <span>Both Equally</span> </p>





## Conclusion

Presentation and analysis of data were the main objectives of the fourth chapter in this dissertation in practice. An overview of the study, including purpose, problem of practice, participants, and research questions were briefly revisited in the introduction. The data were organized in chronological order to reflect how my students moved through the four weeks of the “Shattering the Glass Slipper” curricular unit. Within each week, highlights from the various activities and discussions were presented and analyzed as they relate to the present study. The post-survey section utilized a side-by-side comparison of the data collected in the pre- and post-surveys to show growth in the students’ understanding of gender stereotypes.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND SUMMARY**

### **Introduction**

Classroom teachers are often faced with the challenge of supplementing their provided curriculum with intentionally targeted materials that better meet the needs of their students. The present study was a case such as this, wherein I realized that my curriculum did not sufficiently address gender roles and norms that were contradictory to those society has stereotypically normalized. Student participants were my third grade ELA students for the 2020-2021 school year and the setting was an urban, working class, elementary school located in Columbia, South Carolina. Using a qualitative methods approach to data collection, I was able to analyze the impact a teacher-designed curricular unit titled “Shattering the Glass Slipper” had on my students’ worldviews concerning gender roles and norms. The following research question and sub-questions guided my study and provide the structure of this chapter:

**Research Question:** What is the impact of an English Language Arts unit involving texts and activities that depict nontraditional gender roles and norms on third grade students in a Southern, working class, elementary school?

**Sub-Question 1:** How are students’ preconceived notions in relation to gender roles and norms challenged over the course of the implemented curricular unit?

**Sub-Question 2:** What are some of the difficulties of implementing a curricular unit that disrupts traditional gender roles and norms in an urban, Southern school?

## Chapter Overview

This chapter began with a summary of the problem of practice, purpose, participants, settings, and research questions associated with the present study. The goal for the remainder of the chapter is to provide concluding information and recommendations for next steps based on the data presentation and analysis in chapter four. This information is organized as it relates to each research question or sub-question listed above. Within this structure, outcomes are linked to the study's theoretical framework and existing literature, and the findings are connected to recommendations for improving current practice in the elementary classroom. An action plan is given to detail the path for dissemination of findings and suggestions for future research are included.

## Conclusions Based on Research Questions

The purpose of a research study's theoretical framework is to give credence to the entire design process and implementation (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Several theories overlapped to support the rationale of the present study: multicultural education in the sociopolitical context (Nieto & Bode, 2019), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Using the tenets of multicultural education supplied by Nieto and Bode (2019) matched with the underpinnings of the other theories, I had a firm, research-based foundation. Keeping this framework and related literature in mind, this section seeks to answer each research question and sub-questions with concluding thoughts associated with the present study.

**Main Research Question.** The overarching research question for the present study is: *What is the impact of an English Language Arts unit involving texts and activities that depict nontraditional gender roles and norms on third grade students in a*

*Southern, working class, elementary school?* By examining the comparison of the pre- and post-survey, it seems evident that the “Shattering the Glass Slipper” curricular unit had a positive impact on my students. Every question on the post-survey, except the one about being a friend, resulted in more gender-neutral answers. This finding indicates that my students were able to internalize the message in the texts and activities within the four week unit. Several components of multicultural education support this concluding thought: this form of education must be part of basic education, it is important for all students, and it is a process. This unit took a month to complete, but the growth in all my students was evident and the lasting effects continue to influence actions and words in my classroom community months later. The notion that topics of gender roles and norms should be part of basic education for all students is also reported by Hass (2017) in his two-year study with second and third graders, Flynn’s (2003) action research involving fifth graders, and Alberti’s (2010) single gender/race study with African American third grade males. These studies were reviewed in detail in chapter two and continue to provide reference to inform my current classroom instruction.

**Sub-Question One.** To further delve into the implications of my research, I wondered: *How are students’ preconceived notions in relation to gender roles and norms challenged over the course of the implemented curricular unit?* Based on results from the pre-survey, my students came into this school year with traditional, stereotypical views of gender roles and norms as they relate to professional roles and other skills or behaviors. This led them to strongly police the gender boundaries at the beginning of the unit. Actions of this nature were documented in studies by Dutro (2001/2002), Wohlwend (2009, 2011, 2012), and Cvencek, Meltzoff, and Greenwald (2011). Relying

on the social learning theory's implication that human learning and behavior can be influenced by others through observing, modeling, and imitating (Bandura, 1977), I intentionally created the time and space for my students to discuss and explore their wonderings based on the information and perspectives presented in the unit. I was also hyper-aware that my reactions to their inquiries could and would influence how they perceived society's normalization of stereotypical gender roles and norms.

Some students crossed the gender boundaries early and often in the unit while others took longer to shed their self-imposed boundary policing roles. Interestingly, early in the unit they more readily accepted gender boundary crossing from book characters or in news articles than from each other. They would vehemently defend the main character of a read aloud and support his or her right to choose certain toys, clothes, or activities, but it took longer for them to switch that to a first-person point of view. By the third week, all of my students were willing to accept some variations of gender roles and norms in themselves and others. This is also when my students started to forcefully critique society's constriction on boys crossing the gender boundaries more harshly than that of girls. They noticed and named the issues connected to this multiple times, citing the lack of children's literature featuring girl main characters who were selecting activities or interests traditionally associated with boys. When we discussed this further, it became apparent to them that over time society had normalized, for example, girls wearing pants or playing sports, but had not normalized boys wearing dresses or playing with dolls. At this juncture, the components of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) came to the forefront since this philosophy seeks to promote students' critical thinking,

investigate the established power structures, and uncover patterns of inequality accepted as the status quo.

**Sub-Question Two.** The final research question related to the present study switched the focus from the students to the teacher: *What are some of the difficulties of implementing a curricular unit that disrupts traditional gender roles and norms in an urban, Southern school?* The main difficulty I faced when implementing this curricular unit was the vast differences in my students' levels of schema regarding the topics of gender stereotypes and societal pressures of conformity. Schema is "a mechanism in human memory that allows for the storage, synthesis, generalization, and retrieval of similar experiences" (Marshall, 1995, p. vii). A more thorough, summative explanation of the importance of schema is provided by Smith (1994) who stated:

Everything we know and believe is organized in a theory of what the world is like, a theory that is the basis of all our perceptions and understanding of the world, the root of all learning, the source of hopes and fears, motive and expectancies, reasoning and creativity. And this theory is all we have. If we make sense of the world at all, it is by interpreting our interactions with the world in the light of our theory. The theory is our shield against bewilderment. (p. 8)

Furthermore, Aebersold and Field (1997) maintained, "If the topic ...is outside [students'] experience or base of knowledge, they are adrift to an unknown sea" (p. 41). Based on this research, I knew I needed time within the first week of the unit to build or extend these schematic connections, providing some of my students with foundational content schema and others with ways to expand or challenge their preconceived notions about gender roles and norms. To activate and utilize content schema to the benefit of learning,



a learner must be “made aware of his background knowledge and exposed to strategies to ‘bridge’ from pre-requisite skills to learning objectives” (Blanton, 1998, p. 172). Burke (2006) suggested it cannot be assumed that students know how to make connections to their own prior knowledge or personal experiences. Knowing that even my students that had sufficient content schema needed to be cued to appropriately active the schemata helped me to properly support student engagement (Carrell, 1988).

Overall, I actually experienced less difficulties than I anticipated. I was initially worried that some of my students’ parents would not allow them to be part of the study; however, this was not the case. All students were given permission to participate, and the parents were supportive of the message this unit promoted. I believe this happened for a few reasons. First, we were several months into the school year, so communication strategies and positive relationships were established. Also, being in the eLearning setting meant that parents and guardians were in the room or area with their students, experiencing the instruction in real time with us. This increased the transparency of the instruction and gave them a first hand view of the educative process. At the same time, the major difficulty I experienced was due to COVID-19 protocols requiring students to be in an eLearning format during the data collection timeframe. The unit was not designed to be delivered through an online format, so some adjustments had to be implemented as discussed in chapter three.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the research findings, I recommend the use of Nieto and Bode’s (2019) approach to multicultural education in the sociopolitical context. Teachers must acknowledge that due to the public school system’s political nature, education cannot be

neutral. According to Freire (1970), education can be used as an instrument of liberation or domestication. This is a powerful statement considering the contradictory power it wields. However, data from the pre- and post-survey indicated that students were impacted by the unit and allowed the new knowledge to challenge their worldviews regarding gender roles and norms. Data suggested that the intervention helped students to define stereotypes and societal normalizations, recognize these in their own lives and in various texts, seek to dispel the status quo, and reflect on new possibilities.

### **Action Plan**

By sharing these findings with other third grade teachers at FRES, the curricular unit has been modified to better meet the needs of the students at our local and particular setting. We now have a slightly expanded, but still intentionally focused curriculum resource to use when seeking to challenge students' traditional assumptions regarding gender roles and norms. This also provides my team with a template for creating other units designed to give students the opportunity to grapple with diverse topics, such as family composition, immigration, language use, and differing abilities. I will continue to share this research at school-wide professional development sessions to inform other teachers of the possible impact that teaching with a multicultural outlook, using the lens of gender roles and norms, can have in the elementary setting. The results of the study may serve as a springboard for presentations at local and national conferences hosted by various educational outlets, such as my school district and the National Association for Professional Development Schools.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The present study had a relatively small student participant sample of only thirteen students; this sample was selected due to convenience since these students were placed in my ELA class for the 2020-2021 school year. This sample size cannot produce data that are generalizable; therefore, a suggestion for future research is to expand the student participant pool to include multiple elementary classrooms. The participant samples in future studies should also contain more diversity of race, socioeconomic status, language, and academic ability.

This study considered only gender roles and norms; future research should study the impact of teacher-designed curricular units focusing on other identify factors as a way to challenge, confront, and disrupt stereotypes. Nieto and Bode (2019) suggested such topics as: race, ethnicity, language, ability, socioeconomic statue, and religion. Affirming diversity through a thorough investigation into these aspects can encourage and inspire students “to work for equality and fairness both in and out of the classroom” (p. 8). The intersectionality of identity factors, such as race and gender or socioeconomic status and gender, could also provide a deeper understanding of the impact these aspects of diversity can have on students. Furthermore, more theories could be connected to the present study, such as gender schema theory (Bem, 1981), which emphasizes that children rely on lived cultural experiences to learn about gender roles. Another connection could be made to expectancy value theory (Vroom, 1964), which suggests that motivation for any given behavior is determined by how much the individual values the outcome and the probability of the outcome actually occurring.

The influences of multicultural education require further research spanning from early elementary to college aged students and extending beyond Columbia, South

Carolina to other states and countries. Another area of additional research could analyze the impact of this framework at private schools versus public schools. Comparing results across age levels, educational environments, and locations could provide an interesting insight into the effectiveness of the curriculum.

## **Summary**

This qualitative, action research study sought to determine the impact of an English Language Arts unit involving texts and activities that depicted nontraditional gender roles and norms on third grade students in a Southern, working class, elementary school. A pre- and post-survey were used to gauge the impact of the unit, along with art projects, news articles, read alouds, student journals, and videos. Data collected and analyzed during the “Shattering the Glass Slipper” unit indicated students were positively impacted and their worldviews concerning gender roles and norms were challenged.

The first chapter in this dissertation in practice included a description of the problem of practice, purpose, setting, research questions, theoretical framework, and research positionality. It also contained an overview of the research design, significance of the study, limitations, organization, and a glossary of terms. Chapter two served to position my study within the field of related literature using Nieto and Bode’s (2019) multicultural education components as a guide to organize information and examples from classroom action research, empirical studies, and peer reviewed journals. The third chapter detailed the process of using a qualitative case study research design highlighting the data collection and data analysis methods. The rationale provided a justification for choosing this method and supported the validity of action research. This chapter also included a description of each participant along with ethical consideration and proposed

participant protection techniques. Chapter four presented and analyzed the data in a chronological order that matched the implementation of the curricular unit. For each week of the unit, data were organized to provide a systematic overview using rich description, tables, charts, images, and dialogue. This final chapter of the dissertation in practice offered responses to the research questions using the results, related literature, and theoretical framework. Implications for practice and an action plan were presented, along with recommendations for future research.

After completing this investigation regarding gender roles and norms, and when considering all the many diversity topics that still need to be examined with my students, so they can better formulate their individual assessments of identity, I rely on the words of Walter Dean Myers (2014, para. 18), “There is work to be done.”

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## APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

The informed consent letter was sent via Class Dojo and email using Microsoft Forms.

Parent Permission - Saved

Questions Responses 13

### Parent Permission

September 9, 2020  
Dear Families:

As part of my doctoral program at the University of South Carolina I will be conducting a study regarding children's views of gender norms. We will examine gender stereotypes, such as "pink is a girl color" or "boys are better at sports" and gender roles, such as "men are doctors and pilots." This study will involve the students reading and discussing literature, participating in seminars, and completing associated activities. I will interview the students about their opinions and ideas, as well as observe their daily conversations. To help with analyzing the data, I will need to record what the students say. I will also want to include their responses and ideas in my research write-up. While your student will not be able to opt out of hearing the stories or participating in the discussions/activities because they are tied into the curriculum, you do have the option of having their responses and any artifacts left out of the study, as well as opting out of the interviews. Your student's grade in the class will not be impacted by your decision. Please complete the form to indicate your choice. All identities will be protected and students will only be identified by initials. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to teach and learn from your child. If you have any questions do not hesitate to contact me!

Warm regards,  
Ms. Suber

1. Student's name (first and last). \*

Enter your answer

2. I give permission for my student to participant. \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

**Figure A.1** *Informed consent letter*

## APPENDIX B: WEEKLY OUTLINE FOR LESSONS

Week 1: NewsELA All female race car driver team. Read and discuss.

Day 1: Pre-survey

Day 2: Discuss normalcy. *Amazing Grace* read and chart

Day 3: List of favorites, connect to gender stereotypes. What is a stereotype? Chart and sort

Day 4: *Oliver Button is a Sissy*, read and chart

Day 5: Who decides? Boxes

Week 2: NewsELA remove gender bias toys from kids' meals

Day 1; Jenny and James birthday party gifts

Day 2: *William's Doll*, read and chart, connect to day before

Day 3: Toys video on youtube.com

Day 4: *Angus All Aglow*, read and chart, connect to birthday party/jewelry

Day 5: *Pink is for Boys*, read and chart, discuss

Week 3: NewsELA when kids get hurt, adults see it differently

Day 1: Fem/Mas Scale Line

Day 2: *Beautiful*, read and chart, connect to scale

Day 3: Princess Chart, ideas

Day 4: *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink*, read and chart, connect to all princess talk

Day 5: Princess role reversal writing

Week 4: NewsELA uniforms for boys and girls

Day 1: *The Boy with Pink Hair*, Why are there more books about boys breaking stereotypes, chart discuss

Day 2: *Jacob's New Dress*, chart and discuss, who decided boy and girl clothes

Day 3: Lightbulb activity

Day 4: *Red*, read and chart

Day 5: Post-survey

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

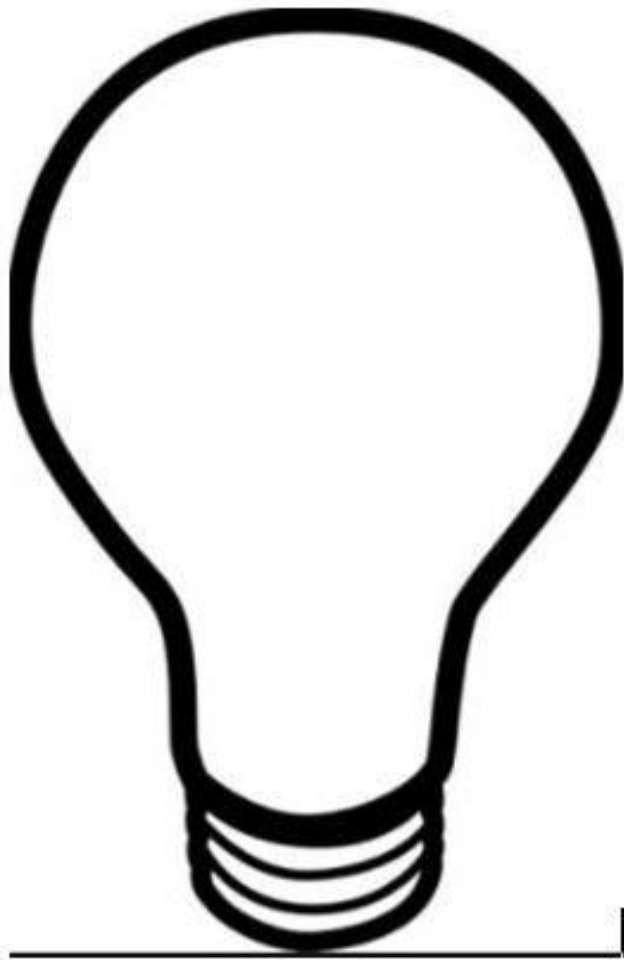
1. What do you remember about our discussions about gender/race? What stands out to you as memorable or important?
2. Were you surprised by anything you heard? Were there things you didn't already know? What did you think about this?
3. Did these discussions ever make you uncomfortable? Why?
4. Do you think these discussions are important for classrooms to explore?



## APPENDIX D: STUDENT PAGES

Pages students received in their gender study folder.

**Gender Light Bulb Moment**  
Inside the light bulb, write about a time you were treated differently because of your gender.  
Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



**Figure D.1** *Gender light bulb moment*

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



### **Gender Stereotypes**

Keep a list of the gender stereotypes you notice in your everyday life.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Use the back of this paper if you need more space.

**Figure D.2** *Gender stereotypes in everyday life*

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

### **Gender Scale**

Place the activities we discuss in class on the gender scale below. Then answer the questions at the bottom.



Pick one activity you placed near the feminine end and explain why you put it there.

---

---

Pick one activity you placed near the masculine end and explain why you put it there.

---

---

Pick one activity you placed near the middle and explain why you put it there.

---

---

**Figure D.3** *Gender scale*

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

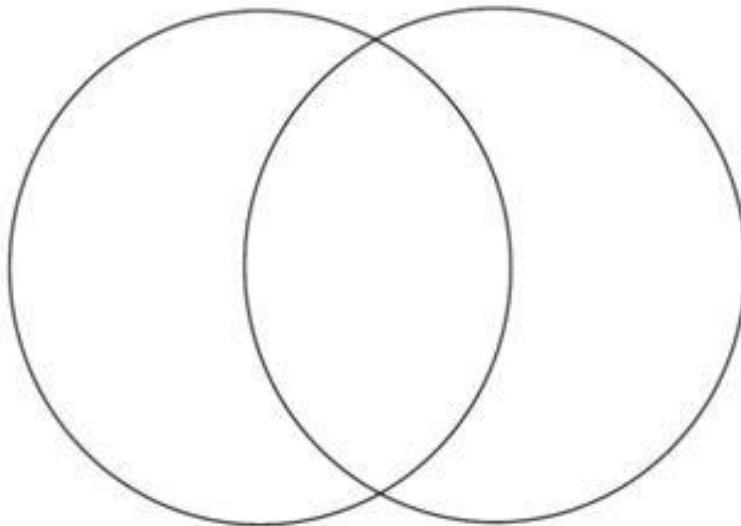
You are shopping for birthday party gifts for five year old twins- Jenny and James. Make a list of possible gift ideas for each child.

<u>Jenny</u>
•
•
•
•
•
•

<u>James</u>
•
•
•
•
•
•

Complete this Venn Diagram during our class discussion.

### Venn Diagram



**Figure D.4** *Birthday party ideas*

## APPENDIX E: PRE- AND POST-SURVEY

Shattering the Glass Slipper Pre-Survey - Saved

Questions Responses 14

### Shattering the Glass Slipper Pre-Survey

Read each question carefully and answer truthfully.

Section 1 ...

1. What is your name? \*

Enter your answer

2. What do you know about gender? \*

Enter your answer

3. Who taught you how to act like a boy or act a like girl? \*

Enter your answer

Questions	Responses 14
<p>4. What does it mean to act like a boy? *</p> <div>Enter your answer</div>	
<p>5. What does it mean to act like a girl? *</p> <div>Enter your answer</div>	
<p>6. What is a gender stereotype? Have you experienced any? *</p> <div>Enter your answer</div>	

Questions

Responses 14

Section 2

Who do you think of when you read the following sentences?

7. The hair stylist finished all the braids. \*

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Both

8. A doctor just operated on someone who was in a car crash. \*

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Both

9. The football player scored the game winning touchdown. \*

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Both

Questions	Responses <span>14</span>
10. The mechanic fixed the engine. *	
<input type="radio"/> Male	
<input type="radio"/> Female	
<input type="radio"/> Both	
11. The teacher gave all the students extra credit. *	
<input type="radio"/> Male	
<input type="radio"/> Female	
<input type="radio"/> Both	
12. The astronaut went to outer space. *	
<input type="radio"/> Male	
<input type="radio"/> Female	
<input type="radio"/> Both	



Questions	Responses <span>14</span>
13. The cafeteria worker cooked several pizzas. *	
<input type="radio"/> Male	
<input type="radio"/> Female	
<input type="radio"/> Both	
14. The parent cooked dinner. *	
<input type="radio"/> Male	
<input type="radio"/> Female	
<input type="radio"/> Both	
15. The firefighter jumped on the big truck. *	
<input type="radio"/> Male	
<input type="radio"/> Female	
<input type="radio"/> Both	

Questions	Responses <b>14</b>
16. The pilot landed the plane safely. *	
<input type="radio"/> Male	
<input type="radio"/> Female	
<input type="radio"/> Both	
17. The basketball player shot a free throw. *	
<input type="radio"/> Male	
<input type="radio"/> Female	
<input type="radio"/> Both	
18. The lawyer met with a new client. *	
<input type="radio"/> Male	
<input type="radio"/> Female	
<input type="radio"/> Both	

Questions	Responses <span>14</span>
19. The college student had to study for a test. *	
<input type="radio"/> Male	
<input type="radio"/> Female	
<input type="radio"/> Both	
20. The principal read a book to the class. *	
<input type="radio"/> Male	
<input type="radio"/> Female	
<input type="radio"/> Both	
21. The singer recorded a song. *	
<input type="radio"/> Male	
<input type="radio"/> Female	
<input type="radio"/> Both	

Questions	Responses <span>14</span>
22. The trash collector wheeled the garage can to the curb. *	
<input type="radio"/> Male	
<input type="radio"/> Female	
<input type="radio"/> Both	
23. The police officer stopped traffic for the parade. *	
<input type="radio"/> Male	
<input type="radio"/> Female	
<input type="radio"/> Both	

Questions	Responses 14
Section 3	
Who is better at the following things?	
24. Math *	
<input type="radio"/> Boys	
<input type="radio"/> Girls	
<input type="radio"/> Both equally	
25. Reading *	
<input type="radio"/> Boys	
<input type="radio"/> Girls	
<input type="radio"/> Both equally	
26. Science *	
<input type="radio"/> Boys	
<input type="radio"/> Girls	
<input type="radio"/> Both equally	

Questions	Responses <span>14</span>
27. Social Studies *	
<input type="radio"/> Boys	
<input type="radio"/> Girls	
<input type="radio"/> Both equally	
28. Sports *	
<input type="radio"/> Boys	
<input type="radio"/> Girls	
<input type="radio"/> Both equally	
29. Art *	
<input type="radio"/> Boys	
<input type="radio"/> Girls	
<input type="radio"/> Both equally	

Questions	Responses <span>14</span>
30. Singing *	
<input type="radio"/> Boys	
<input type="radio"/> Girls	
<input type="radio"/> Both equally	
31. Dancing *	
<input type="radio"/> Boys	
<input type="radio"/> Girls	
<input type="radio"/> Both equally	
32. Burping *	
<input type="radio"/> Boys	
<input type="radio"/> Girls	
<input type="radio"/> Both equally	

Shattering the Glass Slipper Pre-Survey - Saved

Questions Responses 14

33. Farting \*

☐ Boys

☐ Girls

☐ Both equally

34. Cooking \*

☐ Boys

☐ Girls

☐ Both equally

35. Video Games \*

☐ Boys

☐ Girls

☐ Both equally

36. Being a friend \*

☐ Boys

☐ Girls

☐ Both equally

**Figure E.1** *Pre- and post-survey*



## APPENDIX F: CODEBOOK

**Table F.1** *Codebook with Definitions and Examples*

CODE	DEFINITION	TWO EXAMPLES
<b>Girls' boundary policing</b>	Girls keeping themselves or others in line with stereotypical gender roles or norms	<p>1. N.S. saying getting dirty and liking bugs is boy stuff.</p> <p>2. K.E. deciding that the speaker in the poem was a boy because the activities were skateboarding and basketball.</p>
<b>Boys' boundary policing</b>	Boys keeping themselves or others in line with stereotypical gender roles or norms	<p>1. C.D. expressing boys playing with dolls is weird.</p> <p>2. J.D. determining that it is acceptable for boys to be loud and rough, but not girls.</p>
<b>Girls' boundary crossing</b>	Girls excepting in themselves or others counterstereotypical idea or behaviors regarding gender roles or norms	<p>1. L.T. announcing her favorite colors were blue and black and she didn't care if those were boy colors.</p> <p>2. C.A. telling the class she would have short hair if her mom would let her.</p>
<b>Boys' boundary crossing</b>	Boys excepting in themselves or others counterstereotypical idea or behaviors regarding gender roles or norms	<p>1. J.B. sharing that he would wear dresses if his dad would let him.</p> <p>2. A.W. talking about wanting to be kind and sweet, even though his dad tells him to toughen up.</p>

<b>Girls' worldviews challenged</b>	Girls questioning or otherwise expressing ideas/thoughts/actions that are contrary to their worldviews	<p>1. K.E. and C.A. wanting there to be more books where girls are doing counterstereotypical things.</p> <p>2. C.A. wanting more discussion time about why gender stereotypes were created and who decided them.</p>
<b>Boys' worldviews challenged</b>	Boys questioning or otherwise expressing ideas/thoughts/actions that are contrary to their worldviews	<p>1. C.D. deciding it is ok for boys to do some girl things, but girls can do all the boy things.</p> <p>2. E.R. discussing views that a female could be president, and he thinks now one will be soon.</p>
<b>Teacher challenge</b>	Teacher experiencing a challenge implementing the unit	<p>1. Finding books that representing girls doing/acting in counterstereotypical ways.</p> <p>2. Choosing NewsELA articles that allowed room for discussion about gender topics.</p>

## APPENDIX G: READ ALOUDS BY WEEK

Week 1- *Amazing Grace* and *Oliver Button is a Sissy*



Figure G.1 Week 1 read alouds

Week 2- *William's Doll*, *Angus All Aglow*, and *Pink is for Boys*



Figure G.2 Week 2 read alouds

**Week 3- *Beautiful* and *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink***



**Figure G.3** *Week 3 read alouds*

**Week 4- *The Boy with Pink Hair*, *Jacob's New Dress*, and *Red: A Crayon's Story***



**Figure G.4** *Week 4 read alouds*