

# Boys are Like Puppies, Girls Aim to Please: How Teachers' Gender Stereotypes may Influence Student Placement Decisions and Classroom Teaching

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*Since teachers' decisions and behaviour potentially influence learners' future academic and occupational status, it is imperative that these decisions be unbiased. In the study reported here, 21 teachers were invited to place 24 fictional student record cards into regular, advanced, or supplementary learning assistance classes. Study findings revealed that teachers' perceptions of the differences between male and female learners were clearly defined and, on some occasions, did influence teachers' decisions regarding at which achievement level to place student record cards. Findings, as well as the research method employed, may provide teacher educators with useful tools for sensitizing teachers to the implications of their beliefs and biases as well as encouraging awareness toward specific instances of gender stereotyping in the classroom.*

*Puisque le comportement des enseignants et les décisions qu'ils prennent ont le potentiel d'influencer le statut professionnel et académique de leurs élèves, il est crucial que les décisions soient impartiales. Pour cette étude, on a demandé à 21 enseignants de classer 24 élèves fictifs dans des classes régulières, avancées ou avec assistance supplémentaire. Les résultats ont révélé que les perceptions des enseignants relatives aux différences entre les filles et les garçons sont bien définies et qu'à certaines occasions, celles-ci ont influencé leur classement des élèves selon le niveau de rendement. Ces résultats, ainsi que la méthodologie de recherche, pourraient constituer des outils utiles dans la sensibilisation des enseignants quant aux retombées de leurs croyances et leurs préjugés. Ils pourraient aussi favoriser une prise de conscience par rapport à des stéréotypes particuliers liés au genre que l'on retrouve en salle de classe.*

## Introduction

On the first day of school, the teacher places her hands firmly upon my shoulders. Gently she moves me away from the girls' washroom and towards the boys' washroom. My cheeks flush as my peers begin to laugh. I softly explain that, despite my plaid shirt, coveralls, and short hair, I am indeed a girl. Rolling her eyes, the teacher mutters, "What does one expect when you dress yourself like that?" Later that evening I ask my mother if I could grow my hair long. Five years later, a different teacher offers me the lead in our school play "Little Red Riding Hood" on the condition I wear a dress. Unsuccessfully, I argue that the only wardrobe requirement for Little Red Riding Hood should be, precisely that, a little red riding hood. The teacher reasserts her

position and so reluctantly I exchange my standard jeans and t-shirt uniform for a dress I borrow from a friend. My peers applaud my “new look” and my teacher commends me for “finally looking like a girl”.

Sanford (2005) argues that, “unexamined stereotypes shape teachers’ expectations of students’ limited opportunities for them to explore and define alternative realities” (p. 306). Regarding gender, Constantinou (2008) argues that, “while one can assume that most educators try to be fair and attempt to provide equitable learning opportunities for all, it is not uncommon for them to slip into stereotyped attitudes and treat males and females differently” (p. 52). Teachers’ gender stereotypes may be communicated either directly through behaviour or indirectly through classroom assessment. Teachers’ perceptions have also been found to influence the perceptions of students of their academic potential (Fennema, Peterson, Carpenter, & Lubinski, 1990; Georgiou, 2008; Sarra, 2011). Since teachers’ opinions wield power, learners may begin to question their interests if their experience in the classroom contradicts their notion of personal identity. Rather than making assumptions about what teachers think about male and female student performance; however, the study discussed here provides important instantiation of what teachers actually believe about male and female learners.

### **Teachers’ Gendered Perceptions**

In his seminal research on stereotypes, Allport (1954) contends that, “the human mind must think with the aid of categories” (p. 20) and suggests that the categories and labels assigned to people are unavoidable and aid in daily interactions. Yet overgeneralizations and assumptions can also limit the way we perceive and interact with others. Teachers who attribute students’ academic achievement or behaviour to external factors such as race, ethnicity, or gender may be more likely to deny learners their entitled educational opportunities (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Diamond & Spillane, 2004). Various studies have revealed the importance of teachers’ observations and recommendations on learners’ placement in advance level courses, a decision that has significant influence in terms of learners’ educational and career opportunities (Bianco, Harris, Garrison-Wade, & Leech, 2011; Constantinou, 2008; Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2009). Bianco et al. (2011) observe that, “teachers’ judgements and recommendations . . . often become the first step in the identification process. As such, gaining access to gifted/talented identification and services is often dependent on teachers’ perceptions” (p. 170).

Yet research also reveals that teachers’ judgements of learners can be influenced by personal values and cultural assumptions (Brophy & Good, 1974; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Erbas, Turan, Aslan, & Dunlap, 2010), with various studies indicating that teachers’ biases are at least partly responsible for the underrepresentation of certain groups of learners into higher-tracked classes. Learners of colour (Harrison, 2011; Riley & Ungerleider, 2008, 2012; Tenebaum & Ruck, 2007; Van Ewijk, 2011), with learning disabilities (Bianco & Leech, 2010), from a lower socio-economic status (McBee, 2006), or who are linguistically diverse (Riley, 2014) may be particularly vulnerable to teachers’ unchecked biases and stereotypes. For example, in their study investigating teachers’ perceptions of learners with learning disabilities and behavioural disorders, Bianco and Leech (2010) found that teachers were less likely to place fictional student profiles that had been labeled as such into advanced level classrooms with their non-labeled peers, despite having otherwise identical profiles. In another study by Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007), interviews with African-American learners labeled as high achieving revealed that, even

with their high-achieving label, students were still measured by faculty and peers against negative social stereotypes regarding the potential of Black learners.

When discussing gender equality in schools, there is often the misperception among both teachers and students that gender parity has been achieved (Spencer, Porche, & Tolman, 2003). Yet various studies (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Constantinou, 2008; Legewie & DiPrete, 2012; Maynard, 2002; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sadker & Zittleman, 2009; Tatar & Emmanuel, 2001) illustrate otherwise. Studies reveal that teachers regard female learners as more agreeable or more likely to exert effort in the classroom in comparison to male peers (Burusic, Babarovic, & Seric, 2012; Clark, Thompson, & Vialle, 2008). However, females are also less likely to be perceived as having academic potential (Bianco et al., 2011; Constantinou, 2008; Gunderson, Ramirez, Levine, & Beilock, 2012; Sanford, 2005) or to receive time and attention in class (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sadker & Zittleman, 2009). Meanwhile, studies reveal that teachers regard male learners as detached from their studies, compared to their female peers (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Legewie & DiPrete, 2012) and more likely to misbehave (Clark et al., 2008), making them potential markers for disciplinary practices.

According to a theory of gender structure (Risman & Davis, 2013) gender inequality is produced, reproduced, and maintained at three levels of social analysis: individual, interactional, and institutional. The individual level considers the development of one's gendered self while the institutional level examines policies and regulations involving the distribution of resources and material goods that are gender specific (p. 744). The interactional dimension, and the focal point of this study, investigates how the sex categorization of individuals can instigate gender stereotypes that "involve cultural logics that shape what we expect from each other and ourselves" (p. 747). If left unchecked, such perceptions could result in classroom behaviour damaging to a learner's sense of self-worth or even educational opportunities. Jacobs and Weisz (2010) state that, "there is considerable evidence that gifted girls receive treatment from teachers that is more negative, less encouraging to their aspirations, and less encouraging of their taking advanced math courses than their male counterparts (p. 154). In their study regarding gender bias in gifted referrals, Bianco et al. (2011) found that when teachers were provided with one of two fictional gifted student profiles (i.e., female or male), teachers were less likely to refer female learners into gifted programs despite having identical profiles as male peers. Follow-up interviews revealed significant differences in the beliefs teachers held about male and female students. Bianco et al. (2011) state:

When the comments for the male and female student were compared, there were profound differences. The participants' beliefs regarding the female student were expressed with descriptors focusing on negative characteristics such as oppositional behaviours, bossiness, self-critical, or arrogant and were seen as undesirable personality traits of the student; these were frequently cited as reasons to not refer the student for gifted programs. On the other hand, these same characteristics were considered a strength for the male student. (p. 176)

Clearly what was good for the gander, was not good for the goose. While the cards may have been identical, the sex categorization of the student led the teachers to interpret the information very differently. The descriptors, when used for the female card, did not align with teachers' perceptions around female learner behaviour in the classroom and, because of this perception, female gifted learners were denied educational opportunities.

Other studies conducted within the school environment have found that, despite a rhetoric

of gender equality, teachers' perpetuate popular yet potentially damaging gendered stereotypes such as the notion that males are more active and aggressive than their cooperative, agreeable female peers (Francis, 2000); or they have attributed the high achievement of their female learners to effort, while attributing male peers' high achievement to "natural ability" (Cohen 1998; Epstein, 1998; Quenzel & Hurrelmann, 2013).

### **Why Teachers' Gendered Perceptions Matter**

Despite research demonstrating that teachers perceive abilities and learning styles of their male and female learners differently, studies also show that teachers believe their decisions and behaviour concerning male and female learners are equal. For example, when examining the relationship between school-wide gender equity efforts and grade 7 girls' and boys' educational outcomes, Spencer et al. (2003) found that teachers and students reported the school as gender fair, despite individual interviews and classroom observations indicating differences between how boys and girls were treated. While students reported these differences, they interpreted them as teachers responding to the "inherent difference between boys and girls" (p. 1797) rather than as an indication of inequity.

Tatar and Da'as (2012) argue that "teachers are adults with the potential to be significant others for some of their child and adolescent pupils" (p. 352) and so teachers' gendered perceptions may trickle down to students' perceptions of themselves and each other, potentially catapulting teachers' perceptions onto a future generation of learners. The potential harm is that when certain belief systems are reinforced within the classroom, it is often learners who do not "fit" so neatly into categories, that suffer the most. Paechter (2011) observes that "where the hegemonic group of boys held sway over the entire class, boys who did not belong, or even attempt to belong, to this group were systematically ridiculed and pushed around" (p. 234). Frawley (2005) cautions that teachers who treat gendered behaviours as "natural" or "innate" restrict students from expressing feelings perceived as counter to "type". He notes that, "boys who do not fit the pattern of being outspoken, competitive, and autonomous often endure ridicule and subsequent feelings of failure or shame" (p. 22). Male learners may attempt to "match" societal conceptions of masculinity through adopting an "anti-school attitude" that negatively influences educational performance (Legewie & DiPrete, 2012).

Meanwhile, Rice, Merves, and Srsic (2008) suggest that, "gender role assumptions may be at play when teachers are more willing to tolerate girls' initial symptoms, such as depression or withdrawal, because of the assumption that 'girls will be girls' or that depression or withdrawal are natural experiences for girls" (p. 551). They note that there are currently few resources available to help young girls who struggle with emotional and behaviour disabilities (EBD), in part due to the hidden nature of the issue. The researchers also observe that girls diagnosed with EBD are often regarded as more problematic than boys with similar diagnoses and suggest that this may be due to the influence of gender stereotypes upon teachers' perceptions. They state,

There is a paradox in that when girls acted according to gendered norms (being quiet, following directions), they are considered easier to work with than boys. But when they act in gender inappropriate ways (e.g. more like boys) or in extreme gendered ways (e.g. all adolescent girls can be catty, manipulative and mean) they are considered more manipulative [than their male peers]. (p. 559)

Other researchers (Gunderson et al., 2012; Shapiro & Williams, 2012) have found that teachers' gender-biased perceptions of learners' math related abilities contribute to female learners' negative math attitudes and could further perpetuate the shortage of women in math and science related fields.

### **Teachers' Attributions of Students' Academic Achievement**

Attribution theory (Weiner, 1974;1984;1985) attempts to understand the cause of a specific event or behaviour. Weiner's (1992) classification of causes for one's success or failure in an event are determined as (a) locus of control (external/internal), (b) stability (consistency over time), and (c) controllability (controllable/uncontrollable) (Georgiou, Christou, Stavrinides, & Panaoura, 2002; Tirri & Nokelainen, 2011). A teacher may attempt to understand a student's achievement by attributing various causes (ability, effort, task difficulty level, and luck) to their success or failure (Chang & Sue, 2003; Shaukat, Abiodullah, & Rashid, 2010; Tirri & Nokelainen, 2011). Shaukat et al. (2010) explain that attributions made to "ability and task difficulty are stable, whereas effort and luck are unstable [and] ability and effort are internal whereas task difficulty and luck are external attributions" (p. 82). The attributions teachers make of students' success or failure are important for several reasons. First, they may influence the way the teacher perceives and behaves towards the student. For example, a teacher who attributes a learner's success to ability may have higher expectations for that learner's future success, whereas, a teacher who attributes a student's success to effort may be less confident in a student's ability to succeed, because while both "ability" and "effort" are labeled as "internal" in causality, "effort" is more likely to be regarded as "unstable" since the learner's future success is dependent upon their continuous motivation to study (Riley, 2010).

Second, a teacher's behaviour towards a student may influence the way a student perceives their potential. Georgiou et al. (2002, p. 584) observed that teachers tended to show more pity and less anger towards a student, if they attributed a student's low achievement to low ability (internal/stable/uncontrollable), whereas they expressed more anger when low achievement was attributed to low effort (internal/unstable/controllable). Students who perceive their teacher has attributed their failure to lack of ability may feel a sense of hopelessness, since ability is regarded as internal and stable and not likely to improve. Meanwhile, students who perceive their teacher has attributed their success to effort may question their *capacity* to achieve (Shaukat et al., 2010; Tirri & Nokelainen, 2011).

Third, teachers known by students to have gender bias may be more likely to induce "stereotype threat" (Steele, 1997) within their students. Stereotype threat is the invocation of failure among stereotyped group members in situations where their behaviour or performance might confirm or reinforce a negative perception that their ascribed group lacks a valued ability (Aronson, Lustina, Good, Keough, Brown, & Steele, 1999; Aronson, Quinn, & Spencer, 1998; Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003; Shapiro & Williams, 2012; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Wout, Shih, Jackson, & Sellers, 2009). Research has demonstrated that if an individual who cares deeply about the subject being tested is made aware of their stigmatized status prior to participating in a test where their group is deemed incapable, they will not do as well as they would have had it not been mentioned (Deemer, Thoman, Chase, & Smith, 2013; Huguet & Regner, 2007; Johnson, Barnard-Brak, Saxon, & Johnson, 2012; McGlone & Aronson, 2006). In a seminal article, "Lazy, dumb, or industrious: When stereotypes convey attribution information in the classroom", Reyna (2000) uses Weiner's (1984) three-dimensional classification model of

attribution to help educators identify the attributional structure of stereotypes. Reyna argues that, “when an event invokes a stereotype (like failure on a test, or disruptive behaviour on the playground), that stereotype will provide attributional information that may bias a person’s interpretation of that event” (p. 96). She contends that the attributional information conveyed through stereotypes always falls into one of three patterns (internal/stable/uncontrollable, internal/stable/controllable, external/stable/uncontrollable), each associated with a specific emotional response or behavioural reaction (pp. 90-91). These three patterns are discussed in relation to three gender stereotypes observed in research regarding teachers’ perceptions of male and female learners.

**1. “Girls are bad at math, boys are slow at reading” (internal/stable/uncontrollable)**

Two examples of internal/stable and uncontrollable stereotypes are the notions that “girls are less capable in math” than male peers and “boys are less capable in reading”. Teachers who hold these stereotypes may be less inclined to provide resources or educational opportunities, or to motivate learners, to achieve in those areas. Learners who perceive that their teacher attributes their low achievement to lack of ability may be more inclined to experience feelings of shame and/or frustration (Constantinou, 2008) and may be susceptible to the influence of stereotype threat (Huguet & Regner, 2007; McIntyre, Paulson, & Lord, 2003; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

**2. “Boys are lazy, girls try hard” (internal/stable/controllable)**

A negative internal/stable/controllable stereotype is the notion that boys make no effort regarding schoolwork. Since “laziness” is viewed as undesirable yet controllable, a teacher who believes this stereotype may be more inclined to discipline male students. An example of a positive internal/stable/controllable stereotype would be the perception that “girls try harder” in the classroom. Bianco et al. (2011) note that “teachers value individuality in boys and generally encourage male students to ‘try harder’, whereas, female students are often rewarded for their ability to be cooperative” (p. 177). While positive controlled stereotypes may create increased accolades for girls whose teachers hold this stereotype, they could also undermine female students’ perceptions of their ability if consistently praised for effort over ability. Some researchers (Chang & Sue, 2003; Rice et al., 2008) caution that the assumption that certain groups of learners are “naturally” inclined to behave either poorly or well may cause them to be overtly policed or praised while simultaneously preventing teachers from identifying overly-controlled behavioural issues such as anxiety, social withdrawal, and depression.

**3. “Schools are a better fit for girls than boys” (external/stable/uncontrollable)**

External/stable/uncontrollable stereotypes are those in which students’ lower achievement is attributed to something external such as family background or social environment. An example is the popular generalization that “schools do not facilitate boys’ learning styles”. A teacher who believes lower achievement is caused by external factors (i.e., school environment) may be more likely to assist a student through targeted support programs, course modifications, or individualized assistance to override perceived disadvantages. However, Reyna (2000) cautions that students who perceive external factors as too overwhelming to address individually may be discouraged and disengaged.

Given the potential influence of teachers' perceptions upon learners' perceptions of themselves and each other, increased effort needs to be made to ensure teachers understand how their biases may influence decisions about and treatment of learners. Without this understanding, educational policies, practices, and programs operating under narrowly defined notions of gender equity based upon equal rights and fairness may fail.

To illustrate these concerns, the following section outlines a task I designed for teachers that set out to find whether the sex categorization (F, M) as represented on fictional student record cards could influence teachers' decisions to place learners in regular, advanced, or supplementary learning assistance classes.

## **Methods**

Twenty-one volunteer teachers with at least 2 years teaching experience from across a large urban centre in Western Canada participated in a task designed to explore the nature of teacher judgement. Ten had 2-10 years' teaching experience, eight had 11-20, and three had over 21 years' experience. All had experience teaching Grades 6-8, years when teachers' referrals would have the most weight regarding learners' placement into secondary school achievement classes. As the teachers acknowledged, the wealth of experience and expertise that comes from years of practice may account for some of the differences in perceptions and must be taken into account when considering findings. Of the 21 teachers, 18 identified as female and 3 as male. This sample is consistent with reports that female teachers comprise 72% of all British Columbia teachers in public schools (British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 2012) and 87% of all elementary school and kindergarten teachers in Canada (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2012).

### **Task Procedures**

Volunteer teachers reviewed 24 records of fictitious Grade 7 students during a one-hour interview. Each teacher was instructed to (a) review the 24 records individually, (b) consider the criteria for program options (supplementary learning assistance, standard or advanced), and (c) place the card in one of three folders, respectively, "Supplementary Learning Assistance", "Regular Grade Eight Program", and "Rapid Advance Program." To gain insight into their decision-making processes they were instructed to explain their decisions using the "think aloud method" (Van Someren, Barnard, & Sandberg, 1994), which involves participants articulating their thinking while performing a specified task. Each record card described a student's academic history from Grades 4 to 7 and provided information about their background. Academic information was systematically varied within each category, but record cards differed only in name, group identity, and the learner's male/female status. Cards with identical records of achievement were divided into 8 Aboriginal students, 8 English as a second language (ESL), and 8 non-Aboriginal/non-ESL; all groupings divided equally between males and females with equal representation across each category. Results for Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Music and Art were included.

After completion of the task teachers were told that the study was designed to determine the influence of learners' ascribed characteristics (group status and membership) on decision making. Teachers were given the option to reflect on and discuss their decisions in relation to the study or to withdraw participation. Significantly, none of the teachers withdrew and many responded positively, noting that the task enabled them to identify and reflect upon how their

biases may have shaped or influenced their responses, making the purpose of the study more personally meaningful.

Interviews were transcribed and systematically reviewed for emergent themes that illuminated the teachers' interpretations and observations. All teachers were provided with a copy of their transcript to review. Responses were analyzed to gather insight into what teachers actually believe about male and female learners and to speculate as to how this may influence their behaviour. Also examined were teachers' responses to the question, "*To what extent might the gender of a learner influence achievement, or does it?*" In organizing the data, a method adapted by Boyatziz (1998) and outlined by Rubin and Rubin (2005, p. 216) was used to create a list identifying appropriate themes in accordance with the literature. For each theme, the concept was labelled, coded, and defined to ensure accuracy. The list was filed for referral to ensure teachers' responses were consistent with the code to which they were applied. The connection noted between and across interviews helped the examination of preconceptions and assumptions. Two additional researchers reviewed and validated the coded interviews and disagreements were revisited and resolved with discussion.

### Findings Overview

While teachers were asked to place the fictional students into classrooms based upon the grades on the record cards alone, the study revealed that teachers were influenced by factors such as race, linguistic status, and gender. Findings<sup>1</sup> reveal that some teachers' perceptions of the differences between male and female learners were clearly defined and, on some occasions, influenced their decision making. Teachers' responses related directly to the fictional student record cards fell into one of four categories.

1. ***Accurate placement according to three levels of achievement:*** Only one teacher fell into this category. Here, students were differentiated by achievement level rather than their group status. This teacher acknowledged electing to focus on grades rather than designated group status as she believed the labels could incite bias.
2. ***Placement according to two levels of achievement:*** Five teachers placed students according to only two levels of achievement (advanced and regular Grade 8) because they stated that the grades of the fictional learners were not low enough to warrant supplementary learning assistance.
3. ***Teachers' refusal to differentiate regardless of achievement levels:*** Four teachers objected to placing students into differing levels and opted to place all students, regardless of achievement, into the regular Grade 8 class. Their rationale varied from a fear that students would miss elective courses, to opposition to the notion of an "accelerated" classroom, to a belief that students' peer relationships would suffer. It is important to remember that denial of opportunity constitutes discrimination and, in these cases, eight high-achieving students would have been effectively denied the benefits accruing from advanced classroom placement on the basis of their teachers' belief systems around student placement.
4. ***Teachers whose placement recommendations demonstrated bias:*** Eleven teachers' placement recommendations were influenced by arbitrary factors such as the Aboriginal, ESL, and/or gender label. Interview transcripts revealed that "gender" as a category directly factored into student placement decisions in the following ways. Two teachers placed male fictional learners into a lower-level classroom than same-level female



peers due to a belief that female students *in general* mature faster than boys and an assumption that female learners could better adapt to an advanced classroom. Another teacher placed a high-achieving female ESL student into an advanced classroom while leaving her same-level, male peers in a regular classroom then, justified the decision based on the student's combined ESL/female status. Finally, seven teachers debated whether or not to promote a non-Aboriginal, non-ESL male student into the advanced classroom based upon his A+ in Language Arts, despite a regular level of achievement. They remarked that A+ in Language Arts was "exceptional" for a male learner. Based on that belief, four of the seven teachers advanced the student.

While most placement decisions were not influenced solely by gender (findings indicated that Aboriginal and ESL labels were most likely to influence student placement positions), 20 of 21 interviews revealed differences in teachers' perceptions of male and female learners regarding maturity, behaviour, or classroom learning styles, or a combination of the above. Teachers acknowledged that their observations often vindicated popular stereotypes; however, they were not alarmed, which perhaps indicates the entrenched gender norms within society and education.

The following section describes teachers' gender attributions regarding (a) ability (internal/stable/uncontrollable), (b) behaviour (internal/stable/controllable), and (c) academic environment (external/stable/uncontrollable).

### **Gender and Academic Ability (internal/stable/uncontrollable)**

Of the 21 teachers, 7 discussed the differences between male and female learners' academic performance. Peter<sup>2</sup> states:

I would like to think that gender wouldn't affect student achievement and it certainly doesn't have to, but at the same time, I think that, and it's a generalization, but I do see that boys' writing particularly or achievement in math differs a little bit from girls'. . . I'd try to answer how much of that is based on gender but I do notice small differences.

Peter placed an advanced, female ESL learner at a higher level than her peers, on the basis that she was (a) achieving high marks *despite her ESL status*, and (b) female and would *likely mature faster* than her male ESL peers with the same grades. Four teachers observed gender differences in subjects like Language Arts and Mathematics, but attributed these differences to wider societal expectations rather than any belief regarding male and female learners' "innate" ability to achieve in a particular subject. Yet, 7 teachers reacted with surprise to the record card of a non-Aboriginal, non-ESL male who achieved A+ in Language Arts. Noting that this was an "exceptional" grade for a male learner in Language Arts, 4 teachers opted to promote the mid-ranged student to an advanced classroom, while three kept him in the regular class, but stated that they would note his high Language Arts-based achievement for future teachers to consider. Stephanie states:

I would put him in the regular slope and probably send a note along to the high school teacher saying, you know, have a look at giving him some challenge in Language Arts. Maybe, you know, ask him to participate in the school newspaper or something like that. This is a kid who seems to have a real strength there which is great *because boys often don't*.

Tatar and Emmanueul (2001) argue that people's "conscious attitudes are usually egalitarian because prejudice and stereotypes are socially undesirable. However, when attention is focused elsewhere, socialization to specific gender stereotypes unconsciously guides behaviour" (p. 222). While the notion of ability-related gender differences in specific subjects tended to elicit negative responses from teachers who reflected the rhetoric of gender neutrality, the A+ achieved in Language Arts by a male incited a strong reaction from 7 teachers. Since research demonstrates that individuals are more likely to react to information that contradicts their initial expectations (Reyna, 2000), it is perhaps not surprising that the learner's promotion into an advanced classroom was based primarily on the fact that he was a male student with unexpectedly high achievement in Language Arts.

### **Gender and Behaviour (internal/stable/controllable)**

While most teachers dismissed the notion of differences between male and female learners' innate ability to succeed, 20 of 21 teachers noted differences between the maturity, behaviour, or learning styles of male and female learners when asked, "*To what extent might the gender of a learner influence achievement, or does it?*" Michelle noted that the school environment is more suited to female students. Janet agreed. She stated, "Girls like to sit and make work." She continued, "Even as young little girls, they like to play school. It suits girls better than boys." Five of the 21 teachers expressed the notion that girls were better adapted to "*playing the school game*" than their male peers. The "school game" refers to the notion that there are rules and regulations that students must follow. Students who follow rules are rewarded for their efforts through praise, recognition, and evaluation. Students who do not play the "game" are more apt to be punished and less likely to achieve praise or reward. Female learners were described by 5 teachers as benefiting from the school game since they were perceived as compliant with classroom demands. Male learners were described as disruptive, inattentive, untidy, and more likely to reject classroom guidelines than their female peers. Some teachers suggested that the school environment was more *naturally*<sup>3</sup> suited for girls and cited this as a possible reason for them accelerating past male peers. Some teachers expressed the need to modify teaching practices to accommodate male learners who were described as needing a tactile or hands-on approach to learning. Michelle explained:

There are a lot more girls that find it easier to sit for longer periods of time. They take in information. They'll sit and they'll make eye contact more and they'll listen. Boys don't often make eye contact and it can be misconstrued for not paying attention, for not listening. But they are. They just don't make the eye contact. They need to move more. So you know, girls sometimes are just better at doing the things that schools often demand, which is, you know, not right, but that's what happens. And so they tend to look like they're achieving more when maybe they aren't. Maybe the boys just haven't had the opportunities and it hasn't been presented in a way or given in a way in which they are able to achieve success.

Stephanie agreed:

I think gender influences how teachers relate to kids. A lot of teachers see boys as being sort of "less than" in a lot of ways and I think it's because boys don't play the school game. They don't sit still. They don't listen politely. They can but it's not their first *instinct*. Whereas girls are really good at doing

that and because of the way we have school structured, where everybody sits in their desk and they work, boys right off the bat are at a disadvantage.

Both Michelle and Stephanie suggested that school doesn't facilitate boys' learning style which may adversely affect achievement *not because they are academically incapable* but because they are *not behaving according to classroom rules*. Some teachers regarded neatness, hard work, and acquiescence as positive female traits and credited these, rather than academic ability, as contributing to girls' success. Janet stated, "I think girls always want to do well. I think girls *innately* want to please the teacher and want to do well." Teachers also remarked upon the neatness of female learners. Vanessa noted, "Girls seem to love sitting quietly and reading their books and making their work neat. A lot of the boys find it very difficult." Sarah observed what she referred to as "stereotypical" behaviour between her male and female learners. She stated:

You tend to have girls who feel quite comfortable to sit down and write and read for long periods of time. You have some boys who are happy to do that too, but you do get the stereotypes of boys who are much more happy to be doing experiments or special things.

Peter acknowledged the perceived differences between male and female learners as generalizations, but claimed comfort with them because they represent his daily teaching experience. He claimed that "girls always seem to be more interested in presentations and neatness in their work organization" and that they are "more mature at the grade six and seven level than the boys." Stephanie attributed female learners' success to their tendency to be neat and tidy. She recalled how the introduction of laptops at her school led to boys' higher academic achievement because:

They turn [their homework] in and it looks like everybody else's work because it's got a title, it's neatly set up, it's not messy handwriting everywhere. Because of that they get a better mark right from the beginning because the teacher can read it as opposed to trying to scroll through whatever they've written.

While teachers described male learners as having the potential to succeed, 19 of the 21 teachers described boys as either less tidy, less mature, less likely to make an effort, or more likely to misbehave than female peers. Derek explained:

The boys at this age always tend to be puppies. I always call them puppies' cuz [*sic*] they just want to have fun. So it's always a challenge trying to make things, you know, fun enough to catch their interest and try to get good stuff out of them.

Stephanie agreed:

I often see boys in grade seven who are just German Shepherd puppy dogs, arms and legs everywhere, brains aren't going, they're firing off in all directions . . . by the time they hit grade ten, they're doing well. They've gone through that kind of yucky grade seven, grade eight, grade nine stage and they've come out at the other end and are doing just as well as the girls, if not sometimes better.

When asked why she placed a female ESL student in a regular Grade 8 classroom while

placing her male counterpart in the supplementary learning assistance class, Stephanie explained:

Right. So I look at a couple of things. Number one, she's a girl. Which shouldn't make a difference (*laughs*) but it does. At this age, in grade seven going in to grade eight, the girls tend to be more mature. A little more capable, usually more organized, not smarter by any means, but just better able to play the whole school game. Better able to listen to the teacher and follow instructions. And then I look at the grades.

Rachel also noted gender as an influence when making student-placement decisions. While scanning the record card of a mid-ranged achieving male student, she remarked:

Certainly not getting a lot of As so I'd probably put him in the regular program. I might mention to his parents about the rapid advance program to discuss it, but boys sometimes come alive at grade ten . . . but sometimes their social, emotional skills, boys particularly might take longer than girls and so starting in the regular grade eight program might be better.

Despite believing in boys' long-term capability to succeed, Rachel placed both middle-ranging male Aboriginal and ESL students into the regular class, while placing same-level female peers in the rapid advanced classroom.

### **Gender and School Environment (external/stable/uncontrollable)**

Seven of the 21 teachers described the school environment as more conducive for "female learning styles". Increased movement and independent decision-making exercises were noted as beneficial for males. Andrea remarked:

We are far more suitable the way we are, the way the [education] system works, to benefit the girls. And certainly, the more I'm reading I recognize that that's really the case in primary classrooms. So this classroom in the way it operates, with lots of movement, lots of interaction, lots of freedom, lots of student-centered decision-making about how they work, in what circumstances they work, I think works better for boys.

Olivia also modified her teaching style to better accommodate male learning needs. She stated:

Gender influences learning in that the boys are harder to play to, you know what I mean? As far being a teacher goes. I think school is really built for girls. . . . you know, I think you do have to teach boys differently, not because of the way the brain...well, sort of because of the way the brain functions, but not in terms of achievement so much, but in terms of keeping their attention.

Sharon and Janet discussed their decision to attend a course specifically designed to teach how to meet boys' educational needs. The class emphasized a "hands-on" approach to learning with experiential learning and physical activity. Janet was confident that the application of these techniques will create a "*boy-friendly*" classroom. She explained:

The course is fantastic! It talks about how they [boys] have to move and how they like project work

and all that . . . it goes *against their grain* to sit down and write the essay and make some nice, little pictures and make a cartoon because they *need* to move.

Sharon remarked that her experience demonstrates that male learners are “*naturally*” more successful with teaching styles that are “tactile with more of a physical aspect to it.” Rachel agreed and explained she modified her teaching style after having a class of 27 students with only 9 girls:

I have a classroom this year of 27 students, 19 of which are boys. *I don't even see my girls.* I've had to design my units this year with lots of activity because boys are very tactile and they learn very much hands-on. I'm incorporating a lot of music in my lessons this year so that we're learning and moving at the same time and they love it! But it takes a lot of thought on my behalf and a lot of time planning. Girls generally speak and listen better at a very young age and find it easier to stay still. Boys, on the other hand, *innately*, generally, don't sit still for long, prolonged periods of time.

Interviews with teachers revealed that teachers categorized male and female learning styles in distinct and obvious ways. When questioned whether female learners could benefit from more “active” approaches to teaching, teachers acknowledged they could, yet interviews revealed that teachers were more inclined to modify their teaching methods for male learners based on the perception that the school environment already catered to what was described as the “*innate*” tendencies of female learners.

## **Discussion**

Verification through replication is an important, but often undervalued part of the research process. While this study does not mine new territory, it provides important data regarding what teachers believe about male and female learners. It also adds to data that demonstrate, despite efforts to achieve gender equity in schools, teachers view students differently according to gender, suggesting that more work needs to be done. Paechter (2011) argues that, as teachers:

We need to be much clearer in the questions we ask about both male and female behaviour in any given social situation or grouping, and we should ensure that any labelling is related to what we see within in a situation, not unacknowledged reified forms (p. 234).

The following section reviews findings in relation to the literature.

### **Teachers' Perceptions of Male Learners**

Study findings indicated that these teachers generally described their male learners as more misbehaved and less attentive than female peers. As the attribution theory suggests, students exhibiting undesirable “stable and controllable” traits are more likely to incite frustration from teachers. Some teachers in this study described male learners as “immature”, a trait that could be described as either “controllable” or “uncontrollable” depending upon how it's perceived. Since teachers interviewed described male learners' immaturity as “a phase boys tend to go through,” it would seem they regarded “immaturity” as an evolving trait and therefore *uncontrollable* (at least for a certain period). While attribution literature suggests that traits regarded as internal and uncontrollable may result in lowered expectations and long-term

denial of scarce resources, since the maturity of male learners was anticipated to develop over time, teachers' perceptions regarding male learners' overall ability to achieve academically did not seem affected.

However, some researchers (Spencer et al., 2003) argue that teachers' relaxed attitude towards boys' immaturity and misbehaviour may negatively interfere with their long-term development of focus and self-discipline. Also worth remembering is that study findings demonstrated that the perceptions of some teachers regarding male learners as more "immature" than their female counterparts at times resulted in male learners being placed in lower-level classrooms. Oakes (1995) suggests that students tracked into lower-level classrooms may have increased difficulty advancing into higher-level classrooms, thus gendered assumptions regarding male learners' lack of maturity disadvantage them when it comes to consideration for advanced classroom placement. Finally, while teachers in this study were more inclined to attribute misbehaviour and poor effort to immaturity over malicious intent, others may not be so generous. Teachers who link poor behaviour with boys may have an increased tendency to police male classroom behaviour which might be detrimental to both academic success and the students' overall sense of self-worth.

Teachers in this study were also more inclined to attribute male learning difficulties to the educational institution rather than to innate academic difficulties. Due to the belief that schools were better designed to meet girls' needs, some teachers discussed modifying classrooms in accordance with normative gendered perceptions of boys' educational needs. While such modifications may indeed work for some learners, they could also isolate male learners who do not respond to such teaching methods, particularly if there is an expectation that they react positively. In addition, when notions like *schools are made for girls* are perpetuated, male learners who do well in school may feel less inclined to exhibit their natural behaviours for fear of ridicule (Frawley, 2005; Pollack, 2002; Warrington, Younger, & Williams, 2000), particularly in schools where the social construction of gender has not been addressed or challenged.

### **Teachers' Perceptions of Female Learners**

Interviewed teachers praised female learners for maturity, behaviour, and effort, while some also attributed these factors to female learners' academic success. Reyna (2000) cautions that while such accolades may seem positive, when "success" is consistently associated with "controllable" traits like effort and behaviour rather than "uncontrollable" traits like ability, students may question their academic capability and thus undermine their confidence, which could incite behavioural disorders such as stress and anxiety. Such perceptions may also negatively influence the long-term personal development of female learners' self-esteem, career aspirations, and motivation to achieve (Bauer, 2000; Sadker, 1999; Spencer et al., 2003).

In addition, teachers who perceive female learners as more mature than their male peers, may be less inclined to provide them with additional support as they may believe female learners are able to take care of themselves. Such teachers may punish those female learners perceived as less mature, more misbehaved, or even more assertive in the classroom as these traits counter expectations, placing additional pressure on girls to behave according to type. Paechter (2011) observed that "the more a girl takes on local masculine attributes, the more precarious her position within the social group" (p. 232), while Spencer et al. (2003) found that female learners reported feeling "virtually policed by both the boys in their class and their teachers through what the girls themselves felt to be subtle, unspoken expectations that they be

well behaved, smart and helpful for the boys” (p. 1798). Female learners regarded as “loud”, “assertive”, or “active” may be at more risk of being isolated, dismissed, or punished by teachers and peers, yet it is often these traits that are valued in post-secondary institutions. Female learners may also be disadvantaged in later stages of their educational career if they are consistently acknowledged for neatness, good behaviour, and effort alone.

The concept that “*girls are better at playing the school game*” is problematic not only because it undermines the intellect of female learners by attributing their success to their ability to adapt to the school environment, but also because it provides justification for teachers to devote more classroom time and resources to certain groups of learners based on assumptions made about a learner’s gender categorization. Sanford (2005) states that, “the disadvantages of girls are virtually invisible to those working with them, whereas the plight of the ‘poor boys’ is increasingly reinforced through media representations” (p. 312). While some teachers acknowledged, when asked, that female learners could also benefit from modifications to teaching style, the decision to alter practice was based upon perceptions that “schools were not meeting boys’ needs” with modifications made in accordance with gendered expectations.

Modifying teaching practices according to gender-based expectations may not only deny the educational needs of individuals whose behaviours, likes, and dislikes, defy societal norms, but also deny experiences to learners who may fulfill gendered expectations, but who have had little opportunity to experience alternative learning approaches.

### **Gendered Attributions of Learner Achievement Intersected with Cultural Background**

The study design invited teachers to respond to gender, race, and linguistic status as isolated categories in order to determine whether students in any particular category were the target of biased decisions. For this reason, with one notable exception, teachers did not discuss perceptions regarding how the intersection of factors such as race and gender could also shape their perceptions and behaviour towards students. When responding to the question around gender and achievement, Stephen stated:

I have seen a number of students who come from another country and come from religious backgrounds, or maybe not religious but, more, sort of, socially ingrained backgrounds that favour males over females. Because of that, I think that it can have a detrimental impact on female students. When they are culturally seen to be inferior to males, then they can easily think of themselves as inferior to males and it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. And on the other hand, I can see gender in terms of males who might come from that same type of background where males are put on a pedestal and females are thought to be inferior. So some of those males think, ‘well, I’m going to have the world handed to me on a silver platter and, therefore, I don’t need to put any effort into anything I do. I’ll just sit back and wait for people to give me everything I want and need in life.’

For Stephen, behavioural traits are associated with the combination of his perception of a particular culture as well as gender in relation to the individuals living within that culture. While Stephen, like others, described males as less willing to try than female counterparts, he perceived this male learner’s lack of effort as controllable and attributed lack of effort to *both* gender and his cultural background. Similarly, he attributed low self-esteem to the combination of the female learners’ gender and cultural background. Since cultural background is perceived as fixed, teachers who associate certain kinds of behaviours with cultural identity may expect

and look for such behaviours from individuals belonging to certain groups. By assuming behaviours are gender or culturally based, rather than educational, behavioural, or developmental, specific needs that could be identified and addressed may be overlooked.

### **Research Limitations**

Several limitations must be considered in this study. First, it is a small-scale qualitative study of teachers' expectations of students holding different group membership. Second, while fictional student records are useful as a tool to precisely determine which variables influence teachers' decision making, participant observation, interviews, and focus groups with students and teachers may verify whether placement decisions coincide with teachers' behaviour and decisions inside the classroom. Third, any future study could consider the extent to which teachers' perceptions around gender shift according to the intersection of other factors such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or linguistic and/or socio-economic status. Finally, given that research indicates that LGTBQ learners face a higher level of discrimination and harassment both in and outside of the classroom (Taylor & Peter, 2011), more specific study designed to determine the influence of teacher bias in these areas is warranted.

### **Implications for Teacher Education**

Skelton (2010) asserts that, "without explicit attention to gender ideology, current gender equity efforts may not only fail to ameliorate gender differences, they may in some cases have the unintended consequence of intensifying aspects of them" (p. 1802). Teachers overly dependent upon gendered stereotypes in placement decisions or modifying practice, risk overlooking the specific needs of individual learners and may place excessive pressure on them to conform to the dominant values. Teachers can and do attribute the academic achievement of their male and female learners differently and such perceptions, at times, shape placement decisions and teaching practice. While most interviewees acknowledged that not all boys are "immature", "untidy", or "active", just as not all girls are "tidy", "well-behaved", and "mature", they sometimes relied on such beliefs to justify placement decisions and modify classroom behaviour. Such gendered dichotomies in the classroom do not leave room for those who transgress (or wish to transgress) societal norms. Good and Nichols (2001) assert that "teachers need to understand that students' maturity and general conduct must be kept separate from academic performance" (p. 123). Basing decisions on assumptions about certain groups of learners should not take precedence over demonstrated evidence of an individual learner's academic achievement. New teaching approaches would be better directed towards the potential benefits for all learners rather than to the presumed interests and abilities of specific groups.

Rands (2009, p. 427) suggests a "gender-complex" education where teachers are encouraged to question gender representation in society and in the classroom. Rather than create classrooms where learners must fit within dichotomous gender classifications, educators are encouraged to work with learners to identify and challenge the social constructions of gender that exist so as to create engaging and affirming classrooms. Sanford (2005) asserts:

Teachers need to examine hidden and deep-rooted gender assumptions and expectations as they engage with students, so that they consciously provide a wide range of explicit opportunities for all students to develop their identities more fully but not be limited by gender (p. 313).



Bianco et al. (2011) state:

Teachers and other school professional need to be aware of their own biases that inhibit students from accessing the services they need. In other words, teachers need to be aware of their own gender biases as they consider which students they choose to nominate for gifted services. (p. 178)

At the macro-level, policymakers may find this microanalysis provides a useful template for a future, macro-analysis of the extent to which teachers' attributions of a student's success or failure may be dictated by factors outside of a learner's achievement. At the micro-level, teacher educators may find that tasks such as this are useful for demonstrating to pre-service teachers how their perceptions may lead towards discriminatory decisions or practices that could negatively influence the decisions they make and behaviours they exhibit towards their learners. Once teachers are aware of the influence unchecked biases may have upon learners' educational opportunities, teachers may be more inclined to re-examine their practice and reconsider what steps are necessary to facilitate change.

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### Notes

1. A summary of these findings were also relayed elsewhere (Riley & Ungerleider, 2012; Riley, 2014) where specific findings are presented in relation to teachers' responses regarding the fictional student record cards of Aboriginal and ESL learners.
2. All teachers' names are pseudonyms.
3. Words like *innate*, *inherent* or *natural* have been italicized to indicate perceptions that traits were intrinsic to learners.

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