“It Was About the Change!”: Articulating and Contextualizing the Anti-Oppressive Practices of New Elementary Educators

by

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This qualitative study locates elementary educators new to the profession in their experiences in the current educational climate of Southwestern British Columbia. Data for this study was generated through six semi-structured interviews and one focus group with elementary school teachers in the first seven years of their practice. Using an anti-oppressive framework that meshes Kumashiro (2002) and Young (1990), and drawing on relevant literature to interpret the findings, I argue that teachers in elementary schools are enacting a variety of practices in their classrooms that span a range of anti-oppressive possibilities. These practices are shaped by the particularities of elementary education and the current educational climate, both of which are implicated in their choice of, and the results, of their actions. The research suggests that for new teachers, becoming an anti-oppressive educator is an iterative process that develops alongside increasing support, knowledge and agency of teachers. I have concluded with an investigation of the participants' articulation of changes needed to better support new elementary teachers in enacting anti-oppressive pedagogies.
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INTRODUCTION - Elementary Educators and the Promise of Change

Meaningful exchanges with students, opportunities to challenge standards about the agency of youth\(^1\) and empowering students are perhaps the most compelling philosophical promises of teaching (Nieto, 2000, p.15). Some teachers take this promise further and strive to develop anti-oppressive teaching theories and methods that will effect social change.\(^2\) Indeed, one of the most often cited reasons that prospective teachers are drawn into the profession is the desire to make social change. Many teachers come to the profession with very little understanding of the constraints of daily educational controls - constraints that are often covert or institutionalized to the point of invisibility.\(^3\) Teachers who choose to be educators because of a desire for social change often find themselves thwarted by school or community processes, outcast from the community of teachers or walking the line between “appropriate” and “inappropriate” teaching and its corollary of backlash from parents and administration.\(^4\) Teachers who do anti-oppressive work often discover that they must challenge the hidden agenda of parents, administration and sometimes peers in order to “understand the dynamics of oppression and suggest ways to work against it” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 31).

The purpose of this study is to: represent new elementary teachers’ struggle for social change in their own words; to discuss what teachers identify as constraining factors in their work for social change; and describe activist teachers’ perceptions of a need for support vis-à-vis the current educational climate. By investigating the experiences and ideas of teachers, this research will address the gap in the literature around teachers’ need to work together and build community in a system that does not support them in doing so. The questions that guide the direction of this research are grounded in anti-oppressive
pedagogy,\(^5\) as this is the language the participants used to describe their actions and struggles, and is one which allows for an understanding of the social justice work of individual teachers embedded in institutional settings.

In part, this analysis includes how new teachers committed to social change identify and describe their difficulties and efforts integrating into the school system, as well as how the peculiarities of elementary education contribute to, or mitigate, these difficulties. Using anti-oppressive literature and the analysis of six semi-structured interviews and a group interview, I attempt to articulate the experiences of these new elementary school teachers in their attempts to establish a social justice practice that speaks to their developing understanding of the roles of teachers within schools.

Following that, I describe the participants’ ideas about what changes would be necessary to create a more anti-oppressive school system or a school in which new teachers felt safe and supported to pursue and enact anti-oppressive pedagogies.

Before continuing, there are a few key concepts that are central to this paper. I will explicate their meanings here.

**Social Justice**

Throughout this paper, I refer to social justice and social change somewhat interchangeably as models of education that recognize oppression and work towards its’ amelioration. I wish to point out that the term “social justice” is a contested term that can have many applications. The term as used here means pedagogy that aims to address “injustice, unfairness, experiences of violation and manipulation and lack of care” (Greene, 1998, p. xxviii). It requires an active practice of working towards a world free
of injustice, and therefore an understanding of the dynamics of oppression based in schools and suggests ways to work against it (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 31).

Sleeter, Hughes, Meador, Whang, Rogers, Blackwell, Laughlin and Peralta-Nash (2005) indicate a definition of social justice that reflects a Freirian practice of naming and collectively addressing injustice, and focuses on the transformation of structures that perpetuate inequality (p. 290). In a sense, I see social justice as the goal of anti-oppressive efforts.

Agency

Notions of teacher agency are difficult to articulate as they are frequently embedded in discussions of autonomy. In this thesis, I conceptualize “agency” as teachers’ ability to act on their own behalf, within the constraints of the climate and the system in which they participate. Kelly (2004 - 2005) indicates in her research with young mothers that subjugated or marginalized individuals are often discussed as being “…either unworthy choice-makers or passive victims of other people’s intentions and actions” (p. 3), thereby having no potential to make decisions on their own. While I am not arguing that teachers are a marginalized or oppressed population, the historical and social context in which they work and live is subject to high levels of accountability, regulation and evaluation. Thus, the application of free choice is highly constrained. The fact that “teacher identity” is constructed, and frequently named as being outside personal or individual identity is an additional difficulty that new teachers face in their early work as teachers (Britzman, 1991; Sachs, 2001 Sumara and Luce-Kapler, 1996). Davies (1991) indicates that agency lies in the ability to “resist, subvert and change” the
ways that one’s identity is being described and framed around them, both historically and culturally (p.51). In order for teachers to manifest their agency, they need to engage in reflection on their identity, structural context, and social location.

**Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy**

For the purposes of this study, I will be using anti-oppression as outlined by Kumashiro (2002) and Young (1990). Kumashiro’s work enables a more comprehensive approach to situating anti-oppressive work in the climate of schools because of its implicit understanding of the intersectionality of oppression. The framework of Kumashiro’s work indicates that the focus of anti-oppressive education is grounded in a spectrum of practices that teachers can use to address privilege and oppression. Anti-oppressive education, as I will use it here, refers to practices that address the multiple locations of students and teachers as they are embedded in a complex institutional framework.

**Background - Teacher as Researcher/Activist as Teacher**

As a working teacher, I have six years of experience teaching in the public school system. As a youth growing up in a fundamentalist small town, I was always vocal and active in responding to injustice, and wrote my first letter to the editor of the town newspaper when I was still in high school in response to a racist editorial column. In my own experience as a student in the K-12 educational system, I was active in environmental movements and attended my first “walk out” protest in grade 11 in response to the war in Iraq. I was known to argue with counselors and administrators over practices I saw as unjust, and addressed teachers’ sexism when it arose. I was rarely
supported in these efforts by teachers, but continued to actively participate in my community. Prior to my teacher training, I focused much of my time on political activism. Located mostly in the women’s anti-violence movement, I found a community and a practice that helped make sense of the reality of everyday life. “Doing” politics was not an activity on the side, but rather a struggle to integrate my politics into my everyday life. My early activism could be described by the feminist adage “the personal is political.” Over the years, my activism has changed form and focus, but one factor has remained constant: my anti-oppressive beliefs are played out in every aspect of my life. When I made the choice to become a teacher, it was explicitly to use my white, middle-class, able-bodied privilege to expose and pursue the eradication of institutionalized oppression in the school system. The teaching profession was an identifiable place for me to enact my commitment to social change. Sleeter, Hughes, Meador, Whang, Rogers, Blackwell, Laughlin and Peraita-Nash (2005) describe education as inherently political and ethical because of the interactions with students, resources and knowledge (p. 291). Elementary education in particular became the place where I saw the greatest possibility for such transformation, as well as the greatest need for overtly political participation: My perception was that elementary education had yet to embrace an integrated social justice approach to teaching, and that early interventionist discourses that value teaching skills early in education could also be applied to social justice work.

Unfortunately, my experiences in both the classroom and my teacher education program were the first times as an adult that I felt compelled to depoliticize teaching or submerge my politics. I soon learned that in order to succeed, either at fitting the role of “teacher” or avoiding alienating my preservice colleagues, I would need to “tone down”
my politics and merge my beliefs with the liberal paradigms that were presented. The optimistic rhetoric of my teacher training provided little consolation or solution to my experience of the school setting as a reproductive site, mirroring white, middle-class values back to its students by means of curricula, teachers' values and lack of critical programs that move past liberal pluralism. The instruction that did address social justice issues was often ghettoized in one class, and was not generalized to subject area instruction. Banal descriptions of happy classrooms where everyone got along did not help in the construction of an anti-oppressive pedagogy, nor address the realities of urban classrooms in the late 20th century. Social justice issues in the available discourses of education are rarely critical and frequently a low priority in schools.

I feared reprisals from my peers, administration, parents and from instructors. I thought some might judge my sexuality as precluding me from working with children. My non-traditional presentation and interaction with students was seen as a threat to the professionalism of my peers, and I was accused of undermining students' respect for teachers. I was frequently challenged on my delivery (or lack therein) of curriculum and my "bias" in presenting materials to students. In my third year of teaching, I had an anti-racist poster depicting the Internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War II torn from my door by another teacher while I was out of my room. My fears of retribution and my sense of alienation on that staff reinforced the idea that I had to hide my anti-oppressive work. I have had to become more strategic about my anti-oppressive methods and to seek out allies within the schools at which I teach.

I am not alone in this experience. I have met other activist teachers who have devised ways of overtly teaching anti-oppressively or who use Freirian methods of
problem-posing and radicalizing teacher-student relationships to disrupt the authoritative position from which teachers engage with students, staff and curriculum at their schools (Freire, 2002). However, many teachers who are doing activist work in their classrooms are driven underground, making it difficult if not impossible to build community or organize for structural change within schools and school boards (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995).

Since these early teaching experiences, I have had the opportunity to work at a school that uses a sociocultural philosophy to undermine formalistic banking approaches to education (Freire, 2002) and constitutes a peer group in which we work through issues of pedagogy, practice and politics together in an open, supportive way. In addition, I have had the opportunity to explore anti-oppressive education beyond the classroom setting, through becoming much more active in the teachers’ union as well as working as an anti-homophobia and diversity consultant for the Vancouver School Board. Encountering support that is not school-based has heightened my conviction that overtly political teaching is not only possible, but is also becoming easier to enact. This does not contradict the need for this study – my discovery only came as I became a more experienced teacher, and is concurrent with the grounding and confidence that come with time and familiarity with the system. It reinforces the importance of having these kinds of supports available for teachers early in their teaching career, to make transparent and accessible the various communities that already exist for the purpose of supporting and encouraging teachers, and to make anti-oppressive opportunities more readily available.
Relevance of the Study

This study aims to address the needs of working teachers by sharing strategies, seeking to articulate support for teachers and students in organized social movements, and to document anti-oppressive strategies in elementary schools. This research is needed to understand the conditions in which anti-oppressive pedagogy is likely to survive and flourish. The intent of this research is to inform the creation of future programs for use in schools and to elevate support for teachers in collaborative work, and offer mutual support to programs that promote socially just student and school communities.

Exposing and expanding upon the experiences of activist teachers has implications for teacher educators and preservice teachers. Those invested in anti-oppressive education will be better equipped to inform new teachers of the potentially isolating experience of teaching, as well as give a language of resistance to the formation of pedagogical theory. New teachers who are committed to teaching for social change will have a better opportunity to anticipate and respond to their working conditions: lack of alliances or partnerships in schools; institutional resistance to social change; and the conflict of personal politics. This and future research on the subject will address the needs of new teachers, enable universities to give anti-oppressive preservice teachers the tools to “survive” in the system until they are in a position to have some control over their choice of work location and colleagues as well as gain experience.
CHAPTER 1 - Framing the Question: A Review of the Literature

The literature on anti-oppressive education and teacher agency can be divided into three perspectives on teacher-as-activist: professional climate, theoretical climate, and community building. The first perspective emphasizes the current educational climate and the factors that limit teacher agency within the school system (Sachs, 2001; Young, 1990; Hess, 2004; Brown, 1997; Ball et al., 1997; Nieto, 2003; Darder, Baltodano and Torres, 2003; Mohanty, 1990; Fine, 1996). The second focuses on theoretical models available to teachers including how they teach anti-oppressively (Henry, 1992, 1996; Casey, 1993; Coulter, 1995; Ellsworth, 1989; Gabel, 2000; Scanlon, 1993; Graveline, 1994; Chalmers, 1996; Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; Mohanty, 1997; Srivastava, 1997; Dei, 1994, 2000; Kumashiro, 2002; Jenks, Lee and Kanpol, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Kelly, Minnes Brandes and Orlowski, 2003-2004; Kelly & Minnes Brandes, 2001). The third looks at community building and support approaches that are employed by teachers working for social change (Henry, 1992; Razack, 1993; Scanlon, 1993; Hartzler-Miller, 2002; El-Haj, 2003; Freire, 2002).

Educational Climates

The opportunity for teachers to engage in anti-oppressive work in their classrooms is dependent on many factors. There are forces at play in schools that complicate the work of teachers including accountability measures, funding restraints, administrative imperatives and the increasing devaluation and undermining of teacher unions and self-regulatory bodies. In the following sections I will describe how the
present educational climate affects anti-oppressive teaching in British Columbia, as informed by the relevant literature.

Currently, education in Vancouver is a highly public and debated political issue. The provincial government stripped teachers’ collective agreement thereby making job action (strikes) illegal. The difficulty of teachers banding together in the face of such opposition is difficult because of differing perceptions of the nature of teachers’ work. This has been divisive and counterproductive in the building of resistance to cutbacks and increased workloads. These actions by the government increased pressure on teachers for professionalization, standardization and increasing accountability to non-teacher groups, and attempted to undermine union membership and participation. Both of these factors have negatively affected teacher autonomy. Young (1990) indicates how professionalization separates personal experience and beliefs from the increasingly rigid parameters of work:

Professionalization depoliticizes work activity insofar as it removed the ends of the activity from determination by the individual worker. As work becomes professionalized workers understand themselves as following the procedures of an ethical and scientific discipline...Strong explicit or implicit rules prohibit professionals from bringing their personal desires and commitments to the job. (p.77).

Sachs (2001) describes a further danger - that teacher professionalism can be transformed into managerialism. She articulates how professional discourses of teacher identity can facilitate the imposition and maintenance of external controls that further reduce teacher autonomy (p. 155). This can be seen in Canadian schools today with the focus on Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) scores and the comparison of schools by “achievement”. Additionally, competition for students and funding, mandated “school growth plans,” and curricular and extra-curricular demands further reduce teachers’
autonomy in their classrooms and focus on indicators that do not reflect how schools are participating in social justice education, or are fighting racism, homophobia, sexism, class oppression and ableism. Hess (2004) indicates that such practices work in opposition to social justice goals due to the ways that accountability tightens curriculum choices where multiculturalism demands broadening (p. 97).

The Ministry of Education has also undermined the BC College of Teachers, a previously self-governing administrative and disciplinary body, by removing elected teachers from the board and replacing them with parents and Ministry appointed members. Presented as increasing accountability between schools and communities, Ministry mandated School Planning Councils have been instituted to decide on school plans, curriculum, staffing and professional development. Continually, teachers are being undermined in their ability to make decisions about their own work. As Fine (1997) indicates, this continued approach to giving parents “voice” in the school system can ‘set up’ parents and educators as:

...adversaries, fighting over inadequate resources and authority, while the grossly disproportionate share of both remains centralized within the halls of central districts. Indeed, centralized bureaucracies, in their profound alienation, fragmentation and hierarchy, may be well served by the warring bodies of teachers and parents (Fine, 1997, p. 461).

BC schools are also facing cutbacks in financial support, larger class sizes and decreased support in terms of specialist teachers such as Aboriginal education teachers, English as a Second Language teachers, counselors and special education teachers. This forces teachers to compete for limited resources and schools to adopt a competitive approach in order to increase enrollment and the funding that accompanies it. Teachers working within this system are being forced to “compete” for their jobs, and to either
reassure pressure groups that they are doing their job "correctly" or continually justify their practices to a public that is increasingly invested in standardized assessment and that values product over process.\textsuperscript{13} The debate on school choice and competition parallels cuts to funding and support for public schools and teachers, and increased funding for private schools.

All of these factors culminate to create an educational climate in which teachers are being held accountable to parent and ministry groups \textit{first} for their behavior and practices at the same time that chronic underfunding and the rise of "traditional schools" and "parental choice" are raising moral panics about what quality education looks like.\textsuperscript{14} This market based approach to educational funding reinforces class oppression as middle- and upper-class families are the first and most frequent to choose a non-neighborhood school for their children and have the material resources to support these decisions (Brown, 1997; Ball et al., 1997; Fine, 1997). These disparities are exacerbated by the greater ability of higher income parents to contribute time and money to fundraising initiatives that schools now so heavily rely on. In addition, this takes the focus off of the lack of funding and "...thinly drapes a strategy of victim blaming, yoked to a federal retreat from the public sphere, a concerted effort at union busting and an energetic agenda for privatization" (Fine, 1997, p. 460). Fine makes the point here that tokenistic parental involvement distracts from and replaces adequate institutional support for schools, while at the same time dividing potential allies in the advocacy for public schooling.

The downloading of accountability onto individual teachers is also likely to increase rates of new teacher attrition to the private school system and to teaching jobs overseas (Nieto, 2003, 14). These factors, compounded by the increasing layoffs due to
funding cuts and increasing class size have led to little permanent work in the form of contracts, and little regular on-call work. The difficulties of the teacher-on-call position and the increased length of time new teachers remain on teacher-on-call lists have negatively impacted the ways that new teachers become integrated into the school system and receive the related support, community and experience that come with stable employment. Developing anti-oppressive praxis is difficult enough in an institutionalized setting for new teachers, and is only complicated by the visibility and high levels of accountability for educators.

Models of Teaching for Social Justice

The current theoretical climate in schools in Canada and the United States is one of liberal or “mainstream” multiculturalism (Johnson, 2003). In an effort to address the diversity of public schools in a way that does not minimize or undermine systemic oppression, much recent work in the area of multicultural education aims to situate teachers and students in historical power dynamics (Sleeter et al, 2005; Nieto, 2000; Sleeter, 2001; Banks, 2001). These attempts work to transform systemic inequities using:

- a process of empowerment and engagement with knowledge that arises in part from lived experience...[and] facilitates honest, critical dialogues that allow consideration of significant issues among people who share experiences of oppression, as well as with those who do not (Sleeter et al., 2005, p. 291).

This model of multicultural education deals with a wide spectrum of responses to inequity in the school system including citizenship, democracy, and recently, white studies. Multiculturalism has largely been embraced by the Canadian school system, in its liberal form. This, while serving to integrate ideals of diversity and change into schools, often replaces more transformative efforts at systemic change. Darder,
Baltodano and Torres (2003) have articulated one of the ways that counter-hegemonic discourses are manipulated or reduced by explaining the ways that radical or critical intentions are watered down in the chasm between theory and practice. They write, “...each time a radical form threatens the integrity of the status quo, generally this element is appropriated, stripped of its transformative intent, and reified into a palatable form” (p. 14). The current multiculturalist approach illustrates historical and institutional attempts to depoliticize racism by individualizing and creating alternative discourses about the cause, perpetuation, and solution to racism while subsuming discussions of colonialism.  

Mohanty (1990) outlines how multiculturalism can be appropriated by mainstream discourses that are offered:

[K]ey ideas...involve an awareness of race issues (the problem is assumed to be cultural misunderstanding or lack of information about other cultures), understanding yourself and people unlike you (diversity – we must respect and learn from each other; this may not address economic exploitation, but it will teach us to treat each other civilly), negotiating conflicts, altering organizational sexism and racism, and devising strategies to assess and manage the challenges of diversity (which results in an additive approach: recruiting “diverse” people, introducing ”different” curriculum units while engaging in teaching as usual – that is, not shifting the normative culture versus subcultures paradigm) (p. 566).

This argument indicates that such interventions “manage” diversity rather than address the systemic nature of oppression.

Liberal multiculturalist theories in schools often use language such as “diversity” and “inclusion” to indicate an awareness of difference, but stop short of engaging with the cause or effects of this difference (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1997; Dei, 2000). There is a risk that multiculturalism, in its broad approach, can operate to obscure oppression and privileging in favor of a flat description that places all possible identities beside one another without challenging how difference is constructed, enforced, or maintained. In
discourses such as these, systemic power imbalances are normalized, ignored, or perceived as individual and do little to address how student and teacher identities may intersect, or how identities may be comprised of oppressed or privileged experiences (Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh, 2004, p. 157).

Liberal pluralism, or concepts such as “colour blindness” are offered to address real oppression, where conflict and divisiveness is masked, and where systemic or institutionalized oppression is not addressed (Jenks, Lee and Kanpol, 2001, p. 92; Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1997). “Colour blindness,” as described by Frankenberg (1993) is “a mode of thinking about race organized around an effort not to ‘see,’ or at any rate, not to acknowledge race differences” (p.142). This can have the effect of isolating individual struggle from historical context, and therefore to be “co-opted for hegemonic objectives” (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1997, p. 13), as well as encouraging assimilation instead of difference, and universality over particularity (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.55).

Critical pedagogy (Greene, 1998, Apple, 1996) offers an opportunity for the exploration of hegemony and its corollaries of resistance and counter-hegemony in recognizing how power and domination form the oppressive conditions of schools without negating the possibility for change. It would be impossible to discuss the multiple positions of teachers or their context within educational institutions without paying close attention to the contradictions that frequently complicate teachers’ capacity to work for social change. The concept of dialectical theory allows a development of a theory of practice that embraces these contradictions and engages the participants in the creation of and the negotiation of new knowledge, conflations and tensions between objectivity and cultural norms (Darder et al., 2003, p. 12). However, as articulated by
Gabel (2000) and Ellsworth (1989), critical pedagogy frequently fails to move beyond theory, and that by framing practice around vague constructs such as “critical” and “empowerment”, the discourses of critical pedagogy can be a trap that reproduce repression and silence (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 298). Ellsworth’s argument is that terms such as “critical” hide real agendas such as anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-ableism and other anti-oppressive politics. While critical pedagogy is clearly a more politically articulated approach to pedagogy, the processes described by Ellsworth parallel the watering down of politics that happens when loosely articulated terms umbrella distinct, grounded, located movements.17

However good the reasons for choosing the strategy of subverting repressive school structures from within, it has necessitated the use of code words such as “critical”, “social change”, “revitalized public sphere,” and a posture of invisibility. As a result, the critical education “movement” has failed to develop a clear articulation of the need for its existence, its goals, priorities, risks, or potentials” (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 301).

As a result of this conceptual abstraction, Ellsworth critiques the lack of practical strategies available to teachers through critical pedagogical theory, and fleshes out the ways that such an omission can be dangerous, even counterproductive.

From the tradition and the criticisms of critical theory emerged frameworks such as anti-oppressive work, whose focus aims to clarify the ways that privilege and oppression operate relationally within institutions. Anti-oppressive theory aims to situate oppression and privilege in a matrix of intersectionality, where oppression is seen as nuanced and complicated by the overlapping nature of identity.

Given the complicated nature of institutions, anti-oppressive theory is appealing in that it allows for an understanding that invokes individual agency as well as systemic factors. This is consistent with my understanding of the concept of agency, as I perceive
agency to be limited, but not constrained by institutional or structural factors, and that it is precisely this aspect that makes anti-oppressive theory more readily applicable to school settings. While, as outlined above, the theoretical nature of critical pedagogy render it inaccessible or inappropriate for many classroom teachers who are seeking a grounded theory, anti-oppression aims at locating the individual in the context of their environment.

In terms of creating a framework that describes and categorizes ways that anti-oppressive teaching can occur in schools, Kumashiro (2002) outlines four conceptualizations of educational practices that can be used to categorize models of anti-oppressive approaches; Education For the Other; Education About the Other; Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering; and Education that Changes Students and Society. Kumashiro’s work on anti-oppressive pedagogy offers a framework that is useful in describing education for social change. His work is grounded in an understanding of the intersectionality of oppression, and continually frames practices and strategies in terms of privilege and oppression, making privilege visible, and thereby avoiding a deficit model of social justice work. These categories will be described further in Chapter 2.

The research focusing on teacher activism also gives teachers an opportunity to describe their daily work. Some of the literature described the social justice work of individual teachers, and paints a picture of: how and where teaching for social change is happening and how individual teachers enact pedagogical change; the challenges that teachers face with administration (Casey, 1993); and the ideological struggles with moral issues teachers face such as “...how to model the importance of taking a stand without
impeding student inquiry or caricaturing opposing viewpoints” (Kelly et al., 2003-2004, p. 17). The methods, theory and actions of the teachers described in this literature indicate that an activist teaching population is alive and well. Producing and enacting social justice pedagogy disrupts many political and social constructions, challenges entrenched issues of merit and troubles class, ability, gender and race privilege (hooks, 1994). While the existing body of research on teachers’ multicultural and anti-oppressive work details a number of the barriers that teachers face in enacting anti-oppressive pedagogy, it tells little about what teachers are actually doing in their classrooms and offers next to nothing about elementary educators.

Many authors have written about social justice education as framed by teacher agency (Casey, 1993; Scanlon, 1993; Coulter, 1995; Kelly, Minnes Brandes & Orlowski, 2003-2004; Kelly & Minnes Brandes, 2001). They speak to the way that teachers create and maintain space for anti-oppressive discourses as well as describing the ways that teaching for social change occurs in classrooms. Kelly, Minnes Brandes and Orlowski (2003-2004) found that teachers' social justice work ascribed to either a liberal or critical framework in its approach to issues of diversity and presentation. Their exploration focused on the ways that critical and liberal teachers conceptualize issues of social justice and how ideological concepts such as democracy, equity and ethics came to play out in the enactment of social justice teaching, and is often based on high school teachers’ experiences.

Casey’s work on activist teachers (1993) is useful in that it represents how teachers have come to see themselves as change-makers. The narratives on which the book is written illustrate the ways that radical teachers typically go through personal as
well as political changes in order to conceptualize themselves as activists. Her work also clearly outlines the way that educators negotiate working in a climate that is unsupportive or hostile toward their methods. Her work is limited, however, as Casey does not critically engage with her interviewees, nor is she able to critique the practices of the teachers. There is also little information included by which to discover anti-oppressive or activist practices, or to contextualize their experiences in schools.

The work of feminist teachers frequently describes traditional feminist practices of increasing the visibility of women and other marginalized groups in their classrooms, explicitly teaching leadership skills to students and overtly teaching about oppression and privilege (Briskin, 1990; Scanlon, 1993; Graveline, 1994; Coulter, 1995). Henry (1992) explores how the African Canadian women activist teachers she studied employed a different kind of anti-oppressive teaching that is based in notions of community and solidarity alongside an explicit understanding of the educational system as oppressive and racist.

One of the common factors that accompany almost all descriptions of social justice teaching is a fear of backlash. Internalized barriers are also part of the difficulties teachers face in enacting anti-oppressive pedagogy (Chalmers, 1996; Graveline, 1994; Ferfolja, 1998). Some of these barriers are internal struggles with traditional notions about what education “should” look like, while others are external pressures on teachers in the form of increased accountability and standardization to comply with dominant or mainstream educational programs and ideologies. In the final course of teacher education at one local university, preservice teachers are told by a representative of the BC College of Teachers that they can have their teaching certificates revoked for engaging in conduct
“unbecoming a teacher”. This message is not clearly specified in the lecture, and appears highly subjective in nature. Many new teachers, including myself, worried about the interpretation of this claim in both our classroom work as well as our private lives. While visiting a class at this same University as a guest speaker, I heard preservice teachers repeating the lesson: that they could be fired if they used discretionary materials, or teach lessons in nontraditional ways, their concern in this discussion centering on the contentious books representing same-sex parents.

Chalmers (1996) articulates the backlash that frequently accompanies overtly anti-oppressive teaching – the claim that education is being usurped by special interest groups who are destroying an otherwise fair and equitable educational processes, as well as the idea that anti-oppressive teachers are the only ones with a political agenda especially if they come from a non-dominant group (p. 72). Furthermore, there are grave disagreements between parent groups and educational administration about the ability of teachers to responsibly dispense this “political” information in schools. Teachers are often reluctant to use “optional” or “discretionary” resources such as anti-homophobia curricula for fear of being seen as “pushing their own agenda” (Ferfolja, 1998. p. 411; Dei, 2000). Graveline (1994), Dei (1994) and Coulter (1995) explain how backlash to anti-oppressive teaching was made personal and took the form of ostracization, alienation, threats from administration, humiliation and frequently, loss of teaching positions. Graveline (1994) exposes how her use of non-white teaching methods, being “Open with my Politics, Open with my Beliefs, my Practices... Open... Teaching from my Heart” threatened administration and constructed her, an aboriginal teacher, as outsider, as a threat to dominant discourses of leadership (p. 53).
hooks (1994), Lawrence and Tatum (1996), and Razack (1993) all identify the “...fears that teachers have when asked to shift paradigms” (hooks, 1994, p. 37) and the “...fears and barriers to adequate broaching of [social justice education] in classrooms and the variety of white liberal responses to being challenged or de-centered” (Lawrence and Tatum, 1996, p. 339). This literature speaks to the difficulties of enacting individual responses to students, or individual student responses, yet fails to articulate how teachers can practice anti-oppressively in their classrooms.

Teachers are identifying and resisting dominant hegemonic processes in schools in a variety of ways. However, the readings reveal a lack of practical ways to build community amongst, and support for, that population.

Support for Anti-Oppressive Practice: Community Building

Much of the literature I found aimed at communities of teachers could be organized into two areas of focus: professional communities, and how teachers articulated community in and outside of schools, and the role that teacher education plays in supporting preservice teachers and fostering support amongst new teachers.

Professional Community

The literature that addresses professional communities describes strategies that teachers have developed in order to work through issues of pedagogy, support one another and the ways that teachers use community as an anti-oppressive strategy.

Hartzler-Miller (2002) describes the experiences of one first year social studies teacher who identified as dedicated to teaching for social change. Her experiences of disillusionment and marginalization were founded, among other things, in her isolation as
"...the only non-white social studies teacher in the school" (p. 153). Hartzler-Miller makes a case for ongoing support for teachers in this position by creating support groups where teachers have the opportunity to "learn from one another", by extending the teacher education program into the first few years of work and envisioning teacher educators as "mentors" to new teachers (p. 153). In this way, new teachers would reduce their isolation by connecting with others, and may find a way to ground their new practice.

These models of "mentor" and "support group" are useful as ways to imagine a network of teachers and reduce new teachers' isolation, and seems to be an offer that should be extended to all new teachers on an ongoing basis. These models also assume that teacher education programs are somehow exempt from the criticisms of social reproduction.

Teacher-led professional development meetings of the manner practiced at TLC (Teachers' Learning Cooperative) were "...intentionally founded on the premise that teachers could direct their own inquiry-based professional development" (El-Haj, 2003, p. 821). Such opportunities seem a reasonable way to negotiate communities in which teachers can practice and communicate their ideas and work with others. This group, while described as teachers working on issues of equity, appears to be a forum for teachers to discuss students, curricula, and work samples only. Much of the discussion in this work focuses on individual students with the "equity" part of the meetings tending to describe the ways that students were represented at their schools and equality of access for all students (El-Haj, 2003, p. 841). While the prospect of teachers meeting to discuss their work can increase support for their students, it still does not address issues of social
change in the classroom and support for teachers that specifically engage with anti-oppressive themes.

Professional communities where teachers meet to discuss curricula and practice are certainly a good starting point from which to work, but such communities need politicization to be meaningful. Frequently, in the case of social justice literature, the focus of the research is on the work of the individual teacher or on the effect of this pedagogy on students, rather than on building a movement of teachers working for social change. Henry (1992) carries her description of overtly political teaching through to the desire for community as created and experienced by African Canadian women teachers: Henry’s work connects the importance of having community involvement for teachers. The teachers in her study use the concept of “family” to describe their relationships with allies in the struggle for social change. They extend this family to include neighbors, students, community members, as well as their immediate and extended family (Henry, 1992, p. 396). However, the teachers in the study do not discuss a community of teachers within their schools, and their experiences of teacher professional organizations were disparaging: “I tend to find them [professional organizations] very elitist. They’re not really hitting where it hurts” (p. 397).

**Teacher Education and Community**

A large component of research on community or support for teachers is grounded in the discussion of teacher education programs. I have included this literature here because it looks at both the dynamics of building knowledge and supporting teachers in social justice work, but also because a discussion of community amongst preservice teachers is instructive in looking at the needs of new teachers in practice. Many of the
pressures that teachers feel to conform or perform in their working classroom are similar to the pressures felt in the university classroom. Currently there is a great deal of work being done that addresses the desire for teachers to work and learn collaboratively, or to develop a collaborative teaching style (Hinchman and Oyler, 2000; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Miller Marsh, 2002). I would like to draw first on this literature because it is a good foundation of applied practice, but also because the literature in this area tends to be reflexive and critical. I use this literature here with the understanding that teacher education is not a parallel to elementary education because I believe that it informs the experiences of, and often describes efforts to address the potential alienation of new teachers.

There is extensive research and publication, much of it based in teacher reflection, on the struggle to enact a teacher education program that encourages students to independent thought and practice while remaining supportive. That is to say, teacher educators are aware that their own practice should model and enact critical pedagogy in the teacher education classroom, but are unsure how to implement this change. In her article on attempting to address the goals of community-based teaching, Farr-Darling (2000) exposes the difficulties of creating a community of educators in a teacher education program. She articulates clearly the dilemma facing anti-oppressive or critical educators of knowing the problem, but being unable to find the solution.

One way of adapting institutionalized programs to address collaborative or community-based effort is through reorganization of the program to integrate student perspective and collaboration. Cochran-Smith and colleagues (1999) argue for a non-additive approach to social justice or a "...fundamentally different way of doing the daily
work of teacher education” (p. 232). Farr-Darling and Cochran-Smith indicate that fears of exposure, non-participation, and issues of hierarchical evaluation and competition interfered with the process of building a truly community-based program based on social justice pedagogical ideals. This difficulty is exemplified most saliently by their discoveries that as long as standardized evaluation and assessment strategies are being used, students will be unwilling to completely relinquish notions of competition and individual performance (Hinchman and Oyler, 2000; Miller Marsh, 2002). Within this surfaces the difficulty of student resistance to de-centring pedagogies (hooks, 1994; Freire, 2002), as well as the problem of presenting mixed messages about achievement and class expectations. Hinchman and Oyler (2000) indicate how this combination of factors can lead to “ironic” and contradictory or hypocritical expectations on students:

... we were excited when their reflection yielded growing attention to the complexities inherent in all instructional decision-making even as we master-minded step-by-step organizational frameworks for them to use in planning lessons. We invited students to debate issues during class time, but our final pronouncements were often uttered starkly devoid of the many qualifications needed to embrace such ambiguity... We re-enacted an expertise grounded in the techno-rational assumptions of our preparation and sense-making as teachers...through our inquiry we became painfully aware of the ways that our stable classroom practices spoke against our espoused theories of context-specific and shifting curriculum deliberation (p. 505).

Farr-Darling (2000) indicated that despite teacher educator efforts to build a community of preservice educators, there were still barriers to creating a true community in their cohorts. She describes the difficulties preservice teachers had in rejecting traditional notions of classroom behavior such as competition and purely practical instruction without the accompanying changes to the evaluative structure or teaching models. Within the academic community, entrenched notions of performance, merit and individual achievement are difficult to unlearn. In order to ask students to honestly
eschew individualistic values in favor of community-oriented, negotiated parameters, there must be an honest, transparent way of co-creating this community. These problems mirror accountability and autonomy issues present in schools vis-à-vis the relationship between teachers and students.

Montaño, López-Torres, DeLissovoy, Pacheco and Stillman (2002) articulate how the teacher education program they studied aimed for social justice goals, but did not include discussions of “social activism, community organizing or political involvement” within their strategies to achieve these goals (p. 265). This research questions the nature of the claims of social justice practice when theory remains unconnected to the context of community struggle. They argue that teacher education programs do not typically seek consciousness and action, and suggest that such programs risk remaining based in positivistic knowledge acquisition with a focus on individual actions of teachers.

Given these findings, it is surprising that there is not more research attending to the specific needs of teachers to build a community for support of their own needs. While each of the models presented above offer positive support for teachers, not all are widely available, nor would they meet the needs of new teachers alienated by the practices in their own worksites.

Closing the Gap – Identifying a Need for Elaboration

In these three areas of research (educational climate, teaching for social justice and community building), the discourses that were “missing” centered around elementary anti-oppressive practices and the creation of a community of support for such practices. Research that has currently been done on teacher activism or anti-oppressive teaching tends to focus almost exclusively on secondary school teachers. Other than articles that
discuss particular groups of teachers (i.e. lesbian teachers), in which the grades taught and the experience of participants are minimized as variables, and that focused on teacher identity rather than activism, little attention is paid to elementary school teachers (Khayatt, 1992). Articles that do focus on teaching for social change in the elementary school setting are either life narratives that do not reveal their participants’ teaching strategies (Casey, 1993) or else they focus on teachers’ social, non-school community (Henry, 1992).

Two texts on elementary teaching or elementary teachers were grounded in vignettes constructed around themes such as safety, inclusion and helping (Sapon-Shevin, 1999; Regenspan, 2002). While these vignettes were important and thought provoking, they did not provide theory or practical lessons. They advocate for education based firmly in cooperative principles and inclusion. While the introductions for both of these books used the language of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism and ableism, the following chapters skirted such issues and showed successful teachers manipulating classroom management and/or situations to “construct” marginalized children with certain characteristics such as generosity, kindness or sense of humor rather than addressing the social or interpersonal conditions of the classroom (Regenspan, 2002, p. 94). While these texts were certainly aimed at elementary educators and used language reflective of anti-oppressive pedagogy, the material contained by the books was covertly political, highly pluralistic, or reserved the political language for discussions with adults or teacher educators.

The fact that elementary school educators are frequently left out of the academic discussion on anti-oppressive education indicates three possibilities: that elementary
school curriculum or teachers do not enact anti-oppressive pedagogy; that elementary school children are not capable of or ready for critical thought; or that social justice issues do not exist in elementary schools. This is ironic in light of the current emphasis on early intervention discourses of curricula and social issues. In fact, elementary school anti-oppressive education may be the most important work that goes on in education due to the possibility of early intervention, yet is also the kind of work that overall draws the most negative attention. Discourses of brainwashing or backlash are frequently invoked when young students are not perceived to have the agency to make decisions on their own behalf.19

If teacher education programs are the last time teachers are invited to discuss the theoretical and political implications of the educational system, the practice of critical pedagogy can become stagnant, lonely, and dangerous. This paper will move forward to an identification of teachers' anti-oppressive practices (Chalmers, 1996; Dei, 2000), and to their understanding of the needs of anti-oppressive educators to create a more supportive and conducive school climate. I would like to offer teachers the opportunity to co-imagine a world in which teachers support and engage one another around their theory and the practice of liberatory pedagogy.

Clearly, there are teachers who are doing the work of social change and are developing and negotiating pedagogies of resistance in their daily work. There is also room for teachers to develop a community to support each other as professionals and as allies, but this support has not been realized. The need for activist teachers to develop theory and to create and share strategies that address anti-oppressive ideals is imperative
to build a movement for social change rather than to simply sustain isolated individual actions.

The literature outlined in this chapter lays the foundation for a study of the kinds of work that teachers do in the name of anti-oppression. Theoretical anti-oppression writing exists, practical curriculum driven writing exists and teacher identity work exists. I hope to merge these works to create praxis – to represent teachers' agency in their daily work, their struggle against policy, curriculum, ethical and moral standpoints and their personal and applied implications (Lather, 1986b).
CHAPTER 2 - Conceptual Framework

I have chosen to use the framework of anti-oppressive pedagogy, as described by Kumashiro (2002) in which to situate the data as well as the participants. Kumashiro’s anti-oppressive framework uses a poststructuralist approach in an attempt to name many of the ways that identity and discourse overlap, and creates a situated understanding of how practice is embedded in historical and citational contexts. Throughout this project, I repeatedly note that teachers often struggle with the sorting out of their pre-teaching identities as well as their political identities. In a highly politicized and morally constrained climate such as education, teachers’ identities and practices are often fragmented and contingent on factors related to their individual social location while embedded in the historical and institutional school setting.

Conceptions of power are problematized by a poststructural approach, in that it allows for a fluid reading of how identity may change shape and form in different contexts. This thesis is an attempt to make visible the ways that teachers use agency to carve out space within their overlapping discourses as teachers, as politicized individuals, and as agents of change. It is in the pursuit of this fuller understanding of teacher identity and agency that I will situate their efforts to create spaces that account for the complex web of identities they bring to their work with equally complex students.

Understanding teachers and students as embedded in historically stratified roles helps me to articulate how teachers’ practice is at once constrained and informed by the discursive space of schools as well as the complexities of privilege and oppression. Many of the ways that the participants in this study articulated their struggles is in the language of citational processes: ideas of what role a teacher “should” play is informed
by experiences in teacher education programs where traditional notions of authority and conformity remain largely unchallenged. Once teachers understand that their identity is being constrained by discourses about teacher privilege and power, they constantly resist these roles by working to undermine, whenever possible, the citational processes that ascribe privileged and oppressed roles to teachers and students by endeavoring towards a broader, more self-reflexive awareness of their positionality. It is my argument throughout this paper that the participants are constantly making choices about how and when to engage in anti-oppressive teacher discourses.

In having named that the issues facing teachers in their social justice work are largely informed by shifting identities, complex power relations, and situational or partial knowledge, I have chosen to work primarily with the framework identified by Kumashiro (2002) because of the way that his work explicitly addresses the shifting and complex relationships between institutionalized climate and teacher identity and offers the possibility of agency on the part of the teacher as well as the student.

To this end, I will use the four approaches articulated by Kumashiro (2002) to describe the ways new teachers might explore anti-oppressive practice. I have chosen this model because it represents, in a succinct way, the choices available to teachers in terms of situating anti-oppressive theory and practice in their classrooms, and the possibilities, however limited for social change within each. These approaches frame a continuum of possible responses and interventions that teachers choose for various reasons. It is precisely because of the way that Kumashiro outlines the broad spectrum of anti-oppressive pedagogical possibilities that is appealing. My experience with this research process and in schools as a teacher have indicated to me that given the multiple
experiences and locations of teachers, this theoretical framework must account for, and situate all anti-oppressive efforts, and seek not to categorize them, but instead to contextualize them in the teachers' experience of the institutional climate. Having said this, I wish to critique the approaches in terms of their transformative potential for educators.

The anti-oppressive approaches outlined by Kumashiro (2002) each have their own strengths and weaknesses, based on their ability to effect systemic change. For example, the first two approaches, Education For the Other and Education About the Other include increasing the possibility for diversity – both in creating space for inclusion and a new consciousness that includes diversity. In order for these approaches to effect real change, though, there must be recognition of how privilege and oppression operate, and the enactor of such approaches must recognize their role in the dynamics. A paternalistic notion of empowerment still places teachers at the centre of change, and change still happens at the initiative, and with the permission of, the teacher. These approaches do not challenge traditional discourses of “knower” and “learner” nor do they problematize the school as a site of hegemonic reproduction. Within these discourses, teachers provide limited opportunity to challenge systemic knowledge, or the presentation of this knowledge. The teacher still teaches, the students still learn, and the anti-oppressive component of the unchallenged curriculum is distributed at the teachers’ discretion. It also risks creating adaptations that do not change the system itself. In this sense, Education For the Other and Education About the Other can be “mapped” on to the fragmented structure and may effect little change, or have little success in their aims (McDonald, 2005, p. 419).
The second two approaches, *Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering* and *Education that Changes Students and Schools*, are aimed at more transformative change, and assume that the system is itself problematic. This is true of the first two approaches as well, but the latter seek to create the tools within the system for change, whereas the former two more directly require ongoing teacher intervention. The latter two approaches engage with the systemic nature of oppression, but also the ways that construction and transmission of knowledge act to reinforce privileged / othered dichotomies. As with other critical theories, the focus remains on seeking real applications of change, and to applying these approaches to the variety of ways that oppression manifests in institutional settings.

I find it problematic that Kumashiro’s work does not include an analysis of how oppression can manifest in different ways based on the populations affected, on who is privileged as a result, nor on how oppression is experienced differently based on the kind of oppression. In his focus on queer oppression, Kumashiro indicates many of the ways that oppression is enacted against invisible minorities through omission and silence, but does little to address overlapping or intersecting oppressions. For instance, though his approaches address many possible responses to main categories of oppression in schools, they often fail to offer a comprehensive understanding of how and when they may be applied. For Aboriginal students whose family experiences include the legacy of residential schools, including material about Aboriginal communities may be problematic unless it includes a comprehensive analysis of how and what forces and resistance have shaped Aboriginal communities today. The concept of colonialism is complicated and embedded in our institutional practices, and the likelihood of a tokenizing or paternalistic
representation of Aboriginal culture is high. This example is meant to illustrate the dangers of relying on additive practices only.

On the other hand, attempting *Education that Changes Students and Society* with highly marginalized and educationally disenfranchised students can also be paternalistic and serve to further alienate students from their educational experience. Henry’s (1996) critique of child centred learning indicates that engaging in open-ended, critical thinking tasks can end up re-privileging students who already have the cultural capital to participate. This is an applicable criticism to Kumashiro’s work because it problematizes the notion of participation, given the multiple locations of students and teachers. The assumption with many of these approaches is that the teacher is the “empowerer” and the students are in need of “empowerment.” While a catalyst for change is certainly necessary, and the teacher is in the position to be such a catalyst, it does not account for the possibility of teachers using such processes paternalistically or oppressively. The approaches Kumashiro identifies fail to recognize the multiplicity of ways that oppression and agency manifests itself in schools, and in their hierarchy, value certain kinds of learning over others. While it is true that certain anti-oppressive strategies are more transformative than others, this and other research identify that teachers make active choices in using certain strategies over others, based on their own privilege, oppression or agency within the system.

While Kumashiro addresses the ways that individual experiences and discourses are grounded in group dynamics, for example that queer individuals are part of a larger group who also experience systemic oppression, the focus on individual relations with the system are problematic, and undermine a discussion of multiple, overlapping oppression.
Kumashiro's work often risks minimizing the role of social groups in understanding oppression. This needs complication for the purposes of this study, where I hope to increase contextual awareness of the overlapping, shifting roles of teachers, students, parents, and administrators together in their school communities.

In an effort to remain grounded in the lived realities of teachers and students, and to address the need for an understanding of both individual and group identities within an anti-oppressive framework, I will apply the anti-oppressive approaches outlined by Kumashiro to Young's (1990) "Faces of Oppression." My aim in pairing these theorists is to indicate how the anti-oppressive educational strategies outlined by the participants in this study manifest themselves within real, lived oppression. Young's work on the effects of oppression lends an opportunity to consider how the social location of teachers and students is implicated in their choices about anti-oppressive work. In a sense, I wish to discuss the systemic ways that oppression occurs in schools using Young's classifications, and then articulate the ways that teachers, using anti-oppressive educational approaches, address or avoid institutionalized oppression. While I understand that these two theorists are not necessarily similar in their epistemological or theoretical frameworks, I believe that pairing them lends greater depth to an understanding of oppression, and helps to define anti-oppression as a strategy, and to uncover its aims and more comprehensively investigate its implementation. Young (1990), for example, articulates that the transcendence of group difference is assimilationist, and that by recognizing group difference, we can notice and expose more systemic and institutionalized oppression (p. 157). I agree with Young's analysis that oppression manifests differently for individuals who are members of particular social
groups, but desire the ability of individual members to speak to the conditions of their own lives. By this statement, I do not mean to suggest that Young’s analysis is monolithic in its description of group members, but my conceptualization of the anti-oppressive work of teachers is framed in terms of both individual agency, and the diversity of teachers themselves who work in a complex system that values some diversity and works to assimilate others. I find Young’s (1990) categories of the “five faces of oppression”: Marginalization, Powerlessness, Cultural Imperialism, Exploitation and Violence, compelling and not in contradiction with the approaches outlined by Kumashiro, (2002) as they allow for a discussion of the multiplicity of the ways that privilege and oppression affect different social groups or individuals.

Within Young’s (1990) categories of oppression, the approaches to anti-oppressive education described by Kumashiro become more compelling for discussion in the school system. Young’s work addresses the notion of social groups, and of relationships between groups. Her analysis of social justice work explicitly takes into account the ways that social groups interact, given inequality and historical oppression, including “explicitly acknowledging and attending to...group differences in order to undermine oppression” (Young, 1990, p.3). While her work does not necessarily advocate a fluid understanding of, nor a deconstruction of identities, her analysis of group membership is based on characteristics that are certainly overlapping. The point at which I believe conversation can occur between these two theorists is in the way that Young identifies oppression happening in a diversity of ways depending on the context or the manifestation of oppression. For example, her understanding of the “five faces” describes an oppression that is mutable, and dependent on context as well as positionality
of both the privileged and oppressed. In this way, Kumashiro’s work can inform Young by broadening understandings of the ways that identity informs the experience of oppression in schools, and Young lends Kumashiro’s work grounding and localization in the lived experiences of oppressed individuals and groups.

For the purposes of this study and theoretical sensitivity to the data, I will focus on Young’s categories of marginalization, powerlessness and cultural imperialism. Although violence and exploitation are certainly manifestations of systemic oppression, particularly when we attend to colonialist educational practices such as residential schools, they did not come into play in this study in the same ways that the three chosen categories did.

Table 1: Matrix of Practice – Young’s faces of oppression as viewed through Kumashiro’s anti-oppressive approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Marginalization</th>
<th>Powerlessness</th>
<th>Cultural Imperialism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education For the Other</td>
<td>-addressing silences or absences in the curriculum</td>
<td>-teaching social skills and life skills</td>
<td>-checking own stereotypes in curriculum delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-teaching for a multitude of learning styles</td>
<td>-creating space for alternative identities and opinions</td>
<td>-recognizing dominant discourses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education About the Other</td>
<td>-addressing oppressive incidents (name calling, “bullying”)</td>
<td>-teaching about difference and inequality</td>
<td>-indicating bias in curriculum / resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-noticing and exposing inequality when present</td>
<td></td>
<td>-integrate othered texts into the curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering</td>
<td>-deconstructing traditional resources</td>
<td>-curriculum that seeks equality of access and participation</td>
<td>-recognition of schools as sites of reproduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education that Changes Students and Society</td>
<td>-challenging notions of agency and citizenship within classrooms</td>
<td>-problem-posing or decentering pedagogies that problematize authority</td>
<td>-locating individuals in historical and institutional power dynamics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table indicates the ways that teachers participate within a matrix to address social justice issues and teach anti-oppressively. These are rudimentary examples of the way that Young and Kumashiro’s frameworks intersect in schools. This also allows for a
discussion of the participants in the study in terms of their actions in multiple areas. I have chosen to use this format because the activism of teachers in the classroom often falls under multiple categories depending on their political identification as well as their practice. Consider, for example, a teacher who recognizes that curriculum and the teacher-centred focus on learning are oppressive and silencing, but does not engage with the school systemically, may identify strategies that fall in one row ("Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering") with regards to addressing marginalization and powerlessness, they may also use strategies from the second row ("Education For the Other") in addressing cultural imperialism. Likewise, many of the teachers in this study located their anti-oppressive teaching across this continuum in different contexts, based on their understandings of oppression and their own agency. For example, teachers who had greater support and more experience in the system chose strategies that were more transformative in nature.

I believe Young and Kumashiro provide perspectives that can inform one another. My criticisms of Kumashiro’s work is based on a lack of recognition of the disparate ways oppression is experienced, and lack of a concrete description of anti-oppression are answered by Young’s description of the ways that oppression manifests, and the theoretical nature of Young’s work is grounded, for me in the direct educational application of the anti-oppressive approaches outlined in Kumashiro. I will use Table 1 further in the analysis of teachers’ anti-oppressive strategies in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 3 - Iterative Methods for Iterative Means

The closer our subject matter to our own life and experience, the more we can probably expect our own beliefs about the world to enter into and shape our work – to influence the very questions we pose, our conception of how to approach those questions, and the interpretations we generate from our findings (DuBois, 1983, p. 105).

In undertaking a qualitative research project, my desire is to broaden understandings of teachers’ experiences, and to engage in a process that is iterative by design – first through the use of individual interviews, then followed by a group interview. I also aim to broaden understandings of the complexities of teachers’ identities and actions. The aim of this research is not to generate truth or facts, but instead to facilitate a new perspective on the possibilities of anti-oppressive elementary education. In this chapter, I will outline my own role and location in the research, and then describe participants, individual interviews, analysis and the group interview process.

Researcher – Participant / Researcher - Teacher

The design of this research aimed to locate myself in the research, as a peer of the participants, in terms of allowing my own experience to inform the data collection and analysis. I believe this gives me a unique perspective on the context of new teachers’ lives as a new teacher myself. However, I also worked to understand how this perspective might shape the direction of the research and its analysis. As many of the experiences of the participants mirrored my own, I endeavored to let my experiences and knowledge of the school system facilitate the identification of themes, but not to
predetermine the outcomes of the thematic focus - to identify or understand the information that participants were sharing in a context-sensitive manner.

The participants all graduated from their teacher education programs within a four year span, the same time that I myself graduated from my program (1997-2000). Our concurrent experiences made for a great deal of empathy and mutual understanding amongst the participants and myself, and the participants and each other. While this allowed me to relate to their experiences, and to ask relevant questions based on our sometimes shared experiences, it was also a challenge not to make assumptions about their reasons or the context of their experiences. Given our diverse identities, and relative power in the system, part of my process was an ongoing questioning of how their particular location informed their experiences, and how our experiences and positions were similar and different, based on our racialized, experiential locations. I feel that my own transformation from "...new teacher to...not new teacher" (Phillip) was certainly a part of this research process, if only in coming to discover and name the similarities between the experiences of new teachers. I used the interviews to extend, broaden, and develop the discourses that new elementary school teachers use to describe their struggles, their location, their reasoning and their politics, by encouraging the participants to broaden categories and direct their interviews. I attempted this by using member checks of the interviews and of my summarizing of them, by encouraging the participants to influence the direction and focus of the interviews and by using the words of the participants to describe and identify the categories (Fine, Weis et al, 2003, p. 170). Young (1990) indicates how essentializing difference can block "making permeable the categorical border between oneself and others" (p. 170) and how understanding
difference as specificity and variation helps to contextualize experience. It also aids in understanding difference as a “function of the relations between groups and the interaction of groups with institutions” rather than a descriptive, categorical tool (p. 171).

At the same time, this effort needs to avoid obscuring the power differential that accompanies difference between participants, as well as between myself as researcher and the participants (Narayan, 1988, p. 35). I attempted to minimize the obscuring effects of homogenizing experience by encouraging participants to make connections with the experience of others in the forum of the group interview, but also by endeavoring to notice and clarify the differences in experience of participants rather than minimize them by situating them in a matrix of their social and political location (Said, 1978). For example, I was aware of how participants’ racialized, gendered identities affected their experiences in schools and the dynamics of the interviews, and resisted conflating my own experiences as a white woman with the experiences of differently-located participants. At every possible opportunity, I asked questions aimed at uncovering background information that lent greater depth to understanding their teaching situations.

Within the roles of ‘teacher’ and ‘researcher,’ there is an implicit opportunity to have power over others, which requires an awareness of the power dynamics enacted within the process of this research project. Participation in “systems of knowing” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 257) and the corollary of privilege and oppression are inherent in studying one’s own community. In rejecting these traditional dichotomies, I do not presume to remain unaffected by them. The very notion of insider / outsider is complicated in my role as researcher and a member of the same peer group as my
participants. Reay (1996) articulates the difficulties of the “dangers of proximity” (p. 62) – studying subject matter close to our own life experiences - and how it can be complicated by research that is explicitly aimed at advocacy. Reay indicates how identification with the data or participants can deny power and distort the selection and interpretation of data. I have worked to take Reay’s lead on this aspect of analysis by attempting to position participants’ views within their own philosophical framework, rather than an analysis based on my experience as a teacher, and to avoid the possible exploitation of mixing up my own experiences with those of the participants (Reay, 1996, p. 65).

As a teacher who self-identifies as an activist choosing a methodology that encourages dialogue and collaboration between subjects and researcher, I need to be even more aware of my position as researcher and “editor” of their ideas. Said (1978) articulates the importance of recognizing the roles that researchers play in the research, and especially in relationship to the representation of its participants. He indicates the way that research risks misrepresenting researchers as well as the participants by replacing the voices of the participants with the voice of the researcher.

Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself (sic) vis-à-vis the Orient; translated into his text, this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text – all of which add up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient and finally, representing it or speaking in its behalf (p. 20).

For example, outside of this research process, there are participants whom I would identify as both having more and less power than myself. However, our power was not only differential in pairs as researcher and participant, but also in terms of their roles as co-participants in a focus group setting. As such, this research required that I attend to
the shifting dynamics amongst participants and myself by engaging in the interviews with the participants in an honest, open fashion and sharing my own experiences and ideas when relevant.

Participants

To encourage a representation of new teachers that specifically reflected a diversity of theoretical and practical participation in anti-oppressive education, my advertisements and recruitment efforts asked potential participants to self-identify as "social justice teachers," or "anti-oppressive educators". In this way, teachers were encouraged to determine whether or not they were interested in participating. When I received referrals or responses from individuals, I did not attempt to verify their understanding of the phrase, but did respond to any questions asking for clarification of the study. In this way, I did not attempt to recruit a group of teachers who subscribed to similar theoretical underpinnings. I did not refuse any responses, nor ask participants to clarify their understanding of the terms "social justice" or "anti-oppressive" as used in the advertisement. Using the title "social justice education" was a purposeful way to allow teachers to self-define in the context of the educational system. This descriptor does not allude to political background, and while it implies political awareness, it is not necessarily parallel with activism. The result was a broad spectrum of six participants whose practice individually and collectively ranged across all four of Kumashiro's (2002) categories of anti-oppressive education, as discussed throughout this paper.

In attempting to identify participants whose experiences included working in a similar context as new elementary school teachers, but were differently located, I
generally limited my search to the Greater Vancouver Regional District, but did pursue third-party referrals as far away as Merritt and Prince George, BC. The majority of responses I received were passed on by a prior instructor or current colleague, and only one was in direct response to the advertisement.

One of the factors that directly effects the drive and direction of this study, and was a major consideration in locating participants, is the fact that new teachers are alienated from the system and do not hold positions that encourage information sharing and dialogue between teachers situated in schools (teachers with contracts) and teachers-on-call. Many of the participants described the ineffective flow of information within schools as being a barrier to their full participation in schools. As such, it was difficult to find ways to contact teachers-on-call, or teachers not working full time in the profession. To address this concern, I contacted local teacher education programs and asked the instructors of classes based around social justice education or social studies education to identify potential participants from recent graduating classes. This was a successful endeavor, and yielded three participants. I also contacted local union teacher-on-call committees. Another way that I attempted to contact prospective participants was through the school where I teach. In talking with teachers-on-call who were at my school, I found one individual who was interested in participating in the study.

In an effort to find “insider” participants who were active in the area of social justice education, I contacted both local union and BC Teachers Federation social justice committee chairs and asked them to forward information about the study to their members. These included Pride and heterosexism/homophobia, anti-poverty, status of women, and anti-racism committees. This contact yielded two participants. I also
contacted GALE BC, a teacher-run community organization that does work centering on anti-homophobia education from outside the school system.

Teachers are embedded in a complex hegemonic structure that offers a great deal of historical privilege and power, yet still places teachers in a subjugated position as frontline workers within this system. Indeed, teachers occupy a number of dominant and subjugated positions based on their gender, race, class, sexual orientation or ability in addition to their relationship with students and management, especially in a workforce that is largely white, female and middle-class.$^{20}$

However, in the elementary education system in the Greater Vancouver Regional District, white female teachers are disproportionately represented, and the category of “new teacher” is disproportionately below age 30. The participants identified as: one “queer”$^{21}$ white man, two white women, one Chinese-Canadian woman, one Indo-Canadian woman, and one Aboriginal woman. I did not ask participants to identify their social location, so these descriptions are incomplete. I have only included information that they shared with me, and did not make assumptions about invisible identity. In making the decision not to explicitly ask participants to name their identities or social location, I was hoping that the participants would frame their location and identity in terms of their practice and politics. This did not happen, and I believe that I lost valuable information about how they were situated in the context of their work. As indicated in the introductory chapter, my own social location has very clearly shaped my practice and approach to teaching. It was also implicated in my relationships with the participants, in which I strove to be transparent about my own experiences and positionality with them.
Fine (1994) indicates how such awareness can reduce the possibility of exploitative researcher/participant relationships:

Some researchers fix themselves self-consciously as participatory activists. Their work seeks to unearth, disrupt, and transform existing ideological and/or institutional arrangements. Here, the researcher's stance frames the text produced and carves out the space in which intellectual surprises surface. These writers position themselves as political and interrogating, fully explicit about their original positions and where their research took them (p. 17).

By using a series of questions and a method that aimed for action, I hoped to create new dialogue with participants.

All of the teachers in this study were in the first seven years of their practice. Four participants had continuing contracts, and two were working as teachers-on-call at the time of the individual interviews.

**Individual Interviews**

Six participants in total completed an individual interview that was 1-2 hours in duration. The individual interviews were semi-structured; I generated several questions ahead of time (Appendix A) and gave this list of questions to the participants at the beginning of the interview to read. However, the interview typically followed the direction or interest of the participant. Questions were open-ended and allowed for the participants to direct their answers. Subsequent questioning was informed by the responses to the initial questions. In four of the six interviews (Phillip, Sophia, Jayani and Corky), I closely followed the questions I prepared in advance, and in two of the interviews (Sam and Constance), the direction of discussion followed a different path and focused more on particular aspects of their experiences in schools. In Sam's interview, for example, the last section on improving the system and better supporting anti-
oppressive education was curtailed due to time constraints. I attempted to be as transparent and clear in what the aims of the research were, by explaining to the participants my interest and reasons for pursuing the study. I was also honest and open with the participants about my own experiences when they asked. I was cautious, in this capacity, to frame my discussion of the topic in open-ended terms. I attempted to strike a balance between being transparent about my research goals and the space for participants to disagree with or modify these goals. In most situations this was a successful strategy, except for that two participants (Constance and Jayani) struggled with the first question about their personal politics to such a degree that I moved it to the second question in subsequent interviews. With this question, I had hoped to invite participants to describe their social and political issues, concerns and location in an open-ended way. For most participants this occurred, but the two who identified being unfamiliar with their political location named this question as daunting.

Following Lather (1986), I worked to be clear that this research was aimed at critiquing the status quo and identifying teacher's roles in building a more just society, but also conceptualized teachers as “active agents instead of objectifying them and reifying their social conditions” (p. 265).

Analysis

The interviews were audiotaped and I transcribed them verbatim in the weeks following the interview. I sent an initial copy of the transcript to the participant either by email, the postal service, or the inter-school mail system of the Vancouver School Board. I asked the participants to review the transcript and to check it for accuracy and content,
to ensure that it reflected their beliefs and actions, and to add anything that they felt was relevant to the questions of the interview or the study itself.

After the member checks were completed, I reviewed the transcripts and looked for themes that emerged from the interview. I began with an open approach, using the language and themes identified by the participants and avoiding, as much as possible, the imposition of my own theoretical or political constructs or ideological appropriation of participant voices. I attempted to do this by being conscious of my own expectations, based on my experiences and by being responsive to the concerns of the participants. For example, even though I had identified a series of factors in my own experience as a new teacher, and suspected that others may have similar experiences, I remained open to participants' different analyses. In the analysis of the interviews, I identified and questioned my own ideology, location in the literature, and the implications of the study for the participants. I also constantly re-coded the interviews based on newly emerging themes (Opie, 1992, p. 56). Based on the individual interviews, I inductively determined themes that the participants used to describe their experiences in schools. In the individual interviews, based on the questions asked, these themes varied, but all included sections called: "identity" and / or "philosophy", "barriers" and / or "difficulties", "strategies" and / or "practice", "what would be better", "climate", and "teacher education". In two cases, a separate theme called "community" emerged. Based on these themes, I attempted to organize the passages and sections of the interview under these headings. In some cases, an excerpt would belong to more than one theme and would occupy both spaces. I did not search for themes that were mutually exclusive or exhaustive. Under each compilation of passages, I summarized in bullet form what I
thought the key ideas or concepts were from the section. Once this was completed, I sent it back to the participants to review. One participant chose, at this point, to clarify one aspect of her interview, to remove a section that could clearly identify her district, and to indicate, at various places, her agreement with my summarizing of her points. I endeavored towards democratic and catalytic validity as described by Lather as "the degree to which the research process re-orients, focuses and energizes participants" (1986, p. 67) in asking for constant feedback from participants on the themes used to describe their interviews (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001, p. 319).

Following the acceptance and agreement with the transcripts and summaries by the other participants, I revisited the summaries in order to see if any additional categories were required to describe the data. Keeping the original transcripts on hand to verify and check the context of the original statements, I compiled the passages and key points across interviews. I found that many of the original themes overlapped, or were articulated in inconsistent ways by the participants, and so re-sorted the passages under the new categories of: "support / lack of support"; "difficulties of the job"; "dangerous / risky practices"; oppressive school practices"; and "teacher education". It was from these themes that the questions for the group interview came. The questions for the group interview can be found in Appendix B.

**Group Interview**

The group interview was conducted six months after the final individual interview and one year after the first interview. This was due to the fact that it was very difficult to coordinate a date that did not conflict with school reporting periods, holidays or times of increased work for teachers. Of the six initial participants, four (Constance, Phillip,
Sophia and Corky) chose to attend the group interview. One participant, Jayani, had since moved from the province, and another, Sam, was unable to commit to any of the dates offered in the time frame. She was also no longer working in the public school system, and had gone on to work in the union full time.

There were three explicit aims of the group interview: to clarify any ambiguity that came from the individual interviews; to further the discussion about moving forward towards a more anti-oppressive vision of education; and to bring together the participants in a setting where they could respond to, build on and expand the themes articulated by their peers. The group interview was audiotaped and videotaped, and I transcribed it verbatim from the audiotape. Once the transcription was completed, it was emailed to the participants to review. All participants confirmed the transcript without modification. After completion of the review process, I analyzed the group interview transcript and again looked for themes that emerged from the interview. The videotape of the group interview was used only in an attempt to determine ambiguous statements, or to check my field notes for the event in terms of participation and group dynamics.

In reviewing the text, I found that similar themes emerged again, perhaps in response to the fact that I had framed the questions around the data from the analyzed individual interviews. The group interview served to both confirm and challenge the data from the individual interviews. It was significant, for instance, to notice that the teachers whose employment situation had changed in the time between the individual interview and the group interview (finding contract work, change of administration) had drastically different perceptions of the system than they had articulated in their individual interviews. However, in participating in the group interview, it is important to point out
that group dynamics can certainly alter participants' willingness and freedom to express certain information. Given this, I did not discount data that did not fit in to the prior thematic organization, but looked instead for context that would explain the change in terms. The data and analysis that describes this change will be described in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Ladner notes that “the relationship between the researcher and his subjects (sic) by definition resembles that of the oppressor and the oppressed, because it is the oppressor who defines the problem, the nature of the research, and, to some extent, the quality of interaction between him and his subjects” (Ladner in Fine, 1994, p.16). In an effort to undermine this effect in the study, I remained open to the participants taking the interview in new directions and the possibility of alternative discourses. At many times during the group interview, participants re-directed the discussion to topics that interested them and frequently engaged in back-and-forth sharing of information or building upon the points made by other participants. I made no effort to curtail these “digressions”, but instead looked at them as data indicating participant interest and needs.

The material generated by the participants in this study will be presented alongside relevant research in the following chapters. In these sections, I aim to indicate how the climate and identities of the teachers involved affect their practice, how they enacted pedagogies of change, and their visions for a more supportive public school system.
CHAPTER 4 - Complications of Practice: Barriers to Anti-Oppressive Teaching

In this chapter, I report and analyse the findings from the interviews as they pertain to the political and philosophical locations of the participants. I then document the many kinds of barriers that participants identify facing them as new teachers both in the educational and theoretical climates in schools.

Teacher Identity: The Personal is Political

The teachers in this study articulated their personal politics as being firmly grounded in, and often a response to their beliefs about teaching. Their commitment to “changing the world” often drew them into teaching, and once there, this commitment was seriously tested. In order to better understand participants’ anti-oppressive practice and their vision for a “better” system, it is useful to first examine how they perceive their political and social location as well as the conditions they identify as framing their practice. Using their own words, I have placed the participants in pairs based on how they named their political identities, as I found that there were distinct similarities and demarcations between them: those who identified that they were still working to crystallize their politics through their teaching practice and were seeking space within the educational system to be representative, open to difference and use collaborative classroom processes; teachers who were clear in their political direction and conviction, and were proceeding with creating respectful, equitable space that honored difference; and those who were activists prior to coming to education and had an explicit goal of systemic change. The following sections outline the practical conditions of teaching that
affected participants' social justice practice and the theoretical climate that addresses how current pedagogical trends promote or hinder social justice teaching.

*Crystallizing Politics:* “It’s not that I don’t want to, I just don’t know how to sometimes” (Jayani).

Constance and Jayani had both been teaching for four years at the time of the individual interviews, and while their teaching experience to date is quite diverse, their understanding of their roles as teachers in the public school system was quite similar. These two participants responded to my emails about this project with trepidation. Both of them requested reassurance that they were suitable candidates for the study and, although were interested in the study, apologized for lack of clarity in explaining their political identity. This may have been due to the open-ended nature of the questions, or to their discomfort in using anti-oppressive language to describe themselves. Both Jayani and Constance articulated a sense of politics in flux or development, mainly in relation to their teaching experience. In response to open-ended questions about how they identify their politics, Constance indicated: “I don’t even think I know my politics yet” and Jayani echoed this with “Sometimes, I’m not sure, I’m still developing my opinions on things!” and “It’s not that I don’t think of myself as political because I know that everything you do is kind of political but...I guess that I’m not active politically but I’m not ‘rah rah’ does that make sense? I’m quietly political (laughs)”. Both participants demonstrated discomfort in answering this question.

Jayani and Constance consistently framed questions about their understanding of politics in terms of their classroom practice, frequently giving examples of how their politics were implemented in the classroom. Jayani indicated that her politics have come
to the forefront in her struggle to “match up” her beliefs with her practice, or with the beliefs of members of the school community:

I guess I kind of thought about it and how it totally, my beliefs do come down into my teaching but it mostly comes out not when your beliefs, well, my beliefs don’t necessarily match up with the beliefs of my [students’] parents (Jayani).

Jayani continued to articulate her understanding of her politics in the “matching up” of her beliefs and practices, with how her beliefs “match up” with the larger school community: “I don’t always realize it when things seem to be going the way that everybody’s beliefs match up” (Jayani). Clearly, consistency is important in Jayani’s understanding of her success in political work. Her sense of political self is framed by the climate, which in turn is shaped by external forces.

Basing her political identity again in the context of her teacher identity, Jayani indicated further that a critical point in her perception as political came as part of her education degree:

I’m not a person, well especially not before I was in education I was not a ‘put your hand up share your experiences’, kind of person, definitely not a ‘put your hand up share your opinions’ kind of person, for sure, not a share your opinions person.

An open, accepting climate, centered around inclusion is a theme that arises several times in the interview. She described positive relationships with instructors, her reasons for working with children, and her classroom philosophy. In more than one instance, Jayani described her teacher education program, the atmosphere she works toward in her classroom with her students, and the climate she desires in the school in which she works, using concepts such as “comfort”, “acceptance,” “equal opportunities,” “respecting difference” and “support”. Jayani works in a conservative district with very young children, and uses sanctioned educational terms to describe her practice.
Both Jayani and Constance indicated that their identities as Indo-Canadian and Chinese-Canadian women were not reflected in their own schooling experiences. They noted that they were aware of the assimilationist tendencies of schools to downplay diversity in favor of traditionalist holidays and a lack of recognition of nonwhite culture and religion. They noted the perception from their teaching experiences that little had changed from their own schooling experiences. This was a factor in their efforts to do a better job of representing diversity in their classrooms:

My parents were born here so I guess when they grew up there weren't that many Indo-Canadian families and they for sure did things the way everyone else did to fit in...so I feel like it's important to make the classroom so that everybody feels comfortable saying how they do things (Jayani)

I grew up in a town where I was the only Asian girl for miles ...when I was growing up I didn’t learn anything about, even with my own culture, I just learned it from my parents and I speak the language of my parents but nobody cared about my culture, nobody knew about it...it’s a personal thing with me that I feel that’s really important in an anti-oppressive classroom or education system, that it’s something that’s incorporated into the curriculum (Constance)

Constance was clear in describing the way that she thought anti-oppressive education should be enacted: “I would consider myself liberal democratic, I’m very very passionate about social issues, so anything like to do with ethnic relations and personal rights and individual”. This is reflected in the fact that she chose elementary education to “do a job that’s helping the world”. It is in this context that her anti-oppressive approach to education includes understanding and acceptance of other cultures, and takes into account “homophobia, ableism and racism”.
Direction and Conviction: “It’s going to make a difference...and they’re going to become those wonderful citizens that I believe they can be” (Sophia)

Sophia and Corky are grouped together because of the fact their political framework was based in a respect-based philosophy that honored process and embraced difference of opinion and identity. Both identified their struggle in terms of making change, and used their own beliefs and perspectives to help shape students and classroom climate. Their pedagogy was firmly grounded in a political framework that accounted for the climate in schools and for their vision of the role teachers and students play in determining the direction of educational processes. It was in terms of their relationship in schools that they identified their political identity:

I think partly being a teacher has made me more of a political person...that has a lot to do with obviously the political climate in the province, and I never expected to have it affect me so deeply (Sophia).

This occurred both in response to experiences in schools, as well as in the choice to work within the educational system:

The whole reason you go into...I would assume people go into teaching, you know, to get through, to change and help whatever you feel is right, but you know, who am I to say that my way is right or not, but I definitely believe my way is right (laughs) (Corky).

Both Sophia and Corky indicated that the school system was a place for change, and a place that had changed them.

Sophia indicated that her political identity was linked to responding to the inequity she has experienced in her work in schools, but also in response to the political climate in BC, which had become increasingly fiscally and socially conservative in the three years prior to our interview. She describes awakening to her anger about the increasingly unaddressed need of some social groups vis-à-vis her own privilege. Sophia works in an inner-city school, and related her understanding of her own frustration with
the marginalization of her students: “I feel like I’m very helpless that I can’t do much about it and that makes me more angry...I would like to be able to change and I don’t feel that power and that angers me.” She names her relationship with anti-oppressive teaching in terms of working with students to create respectful, open relationships, and helping them to “get the message that they have the power to solve problems and then maybe they won’t end up feeling like me, the way I do right now with this government, that I don’t have any power to change things.” Sophia often talked about her relationships with students in terms of their “empowerment.”

Corky also described a philosophy of teaching that is consistent with her personal politics: that she has a right to express her beliefs and her commitment to her beliefs, but so does everybody else.

I generally am all about equality and you know, finding it, but at the same time... it’s not like I’m enforcing it on them, so I’ve always leaned towards letting people do their own thing but always being there to show a different way of thinking.

She indicated throughout the interview that she perceives her role in teaching as representing difference and different points of view, accepting difference and nurturing open, accepting relationships. She perceived change as beginning with the individual, and consequently, her practices were relational in nature.

Corky and Sophia believed strongly in both modeling and expressing their own beliefs and values in the classroom, and saw their role as helping students to develop not only a respect for difference, but also the skills to identify when they are not being respectful or respected.
Changing the System: "The things that influenced me to become a teacher were purely political. It had nothing to do with oh, I like the smell of chalk or whatever, or erasers in September... nothing romantic about it" (Sam).

Phillip and Sam have a history of activism outside of the school system and of recognizing the school as a site of change. They both identified having aimed to teach in secondary school, but ended up in elementary school for different personal reasons. Phillip felt that elementary school was where he could make the greatest difference. He articulates that teachers are in a position to make change, and to make a difference in the lives of their students. He noted that elementary education is where the effect is greatest on students’ lives:

Elementary school teaching is really appealing to me because that’s where I think it really happens with improving things for student’s lives whether academically, socially, emotionally.

In Sam’s case, the decision to work in education was based on the desire to enact change, especially in light of the fact that her own children are in the public school system. She stated:

It was about the change! ... I was so sick of what teachers were doing I would just be like, ‘come on, shit will you, or get off the pot! Like what are you doing here? Like you could do so many more things like you could do so much here! Why aren’t you doing it?’ and I think I just got sick of it and I thought I’ve got to stop bitching about it and I’ve got to do something.

Sam’s understanding comes from being a participant in the school system, and her awareness of the myriad ways that students and families consistently did not receive support or analysis of social conditions. For Sam, teaching was an explicit place to make change. As a parent and an Aboriginal worker whose politics of community were strong, she saw teachers as individuals who “parachuted in” to communities with little or no understanding of the possibilities of schools as sites of community or social change.
Phillip and Sam identified anti-oppression as a phrase they use to describe their politics, and fleshed out this phrase to indicate that they used anti-oppression as an umbrella term to address racism, homophobia, dis/ability, aboriginal issues and literacy.

“I particularly like the word anti-oppressive...because the anti-oppressive stuff addresses the power and economics... it’s about empowering people, whatever the reason happens to be the fact that they’re oppressed or marginalized” (Phillip). Their understanding of anti-oppressive education was framed by a recognition of the oppressive nature of schools and based on experiences in schools as a student, an aboriginal worker or a parent:

I thought, you know, we’re going to make changes and because my kids were going to be consumers of it, if I didn’t have children, fuck that. I would be in it I’d be like ugh, you know, why would I want to, it’s just so oppressive (Sam).

I hated high school because, um, as a queer student, my life was not reflected at all, negated, the adults stood by while horrible things happened to myself and other people and I thought it was a really shitty place where you’re treated as a subordinate (Phillip).

Phillip and Sam’s approaches to implementing anti-oppressive education focused on many aspects of the school community including parent involvement, union work, policy, advocacy, and the creation of a classroom that explicitly addresses political issues. These two were also the only participants who worked in intermediate classrooms throughout the entire interview process. As with the other participants, Sam and Phillip believed that relationships with students and peers were paramount in creating spaces where anti-oppressive practice was possible.

These participants indicated the importance of recognizing the role that teachers play in the school and addressing their social location in the school community. They described how their own positionality is sometimes contradictory: “even though some
people go 'you're an aboriginal woman you're not privileged', and I think ok fair enough, but in some settings I might have more privilege than others and in this setting I happen to have more privilege” (Sam).

As such, both Sam and Phillip understand that their own social location impacts their work in the educational system. They also demonstrated that the school, embedded in historical and community contexts, is a site for critical possibility, and for work that changes both teacher-student relationships and systemic interactions.

Educational Climate – Structural Barriers to Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy

This section addresses the myriad factors in schools that act as barriers to anti-oppressive educational practices as identified by the participants. These factors can be described by the following categories: lack of support; difficulties of the job; oppressive school practices; dangerous and/or risky practice and teacher education. Many of these factors will be detailed in the following section as they are grounded in both philosophical and practical climate. It is also important to point out that some of the theoretical difficulties are specific to new teachers whereas others are more readily generalized. For example, the sense of being the only teacher who practices anti-oppressively is certainly lonely, even for an experienced teacher, but when compounded by a lack of support, power, job security and familiarity with the system, it can become overwhelming.

Lack of Support

The teachers in this study repeatedly referred to support as an integral component of the educational climate in schools and one that strongly affected their perception of
ability to make change and of themselves as part of an educational community. Indeed for some participants whose job status changed between the individual and group interviews, becoming a teacher with a contract working in one school instead of being a teacher-on-call significantly changed their sense of available support.

The participants articulated their sense of support along multiple lines: the sense that their colleagues were not doing similar work, possibly because they did not believe it was necessary or important, as well as factors related to their status as new teacher including a lack of trust for new teachers, the lack of continuity of teacher-on-call positions, the difficulty in building community and the loneliness of working in a disjointed way in a large system. Teaching in a different class every day meant that there was little continuity or opportunity to have meaningful discussion with students or staff. This feeling was compounded by the sense of real isolation as many participants reported being ignored or treated rudely by staff: “It’s really difficult when you walk into a staffroom and nobody will sit with you at the table” (Constance), and the belief that parents are suspicious or mistrustful of new teachers.

These teachers identified that they were surprised to find, having come from a teacher education program that ostensibly valued social justice teaching, that few teachers were engaging anti-oppressively in their classrooms. Corky stated:

It’s hard to do [teacher-on-call] work…you just do whatever’s put out for the day so it’s not like I would just squeeze in some anti-oppressive stuff out of nowhere, but if you did, you know…maybe she doesn’t want you to do that.

This discovery is significant for teachers-on-call because they felt an obligation to maintain the classroom for the regular teacher, and to avoid disrupting the class culture or the students’ expectations. When, as teachers-on-call, the participants chose to intervene
or act inconsistently with the classroom teachers' beliefs, they reported carrying fear and concern home despite their convictions. This was partly due to the fact that the participants did not generally see administration as supportive. This is significant, for all participants indicated that administrative support is key in feeling able to take risks and do nontraditional teaching. In some cases, as teachers, they were given permission to do such work, but it was clear that it had to be that teacher's initiative, and support was not readily forthcoming.

For teachers with contracts, many reported sharing with their colleagues their interest in social justice or the lessons they had done. Some participants reported receiving generalized support, but most indicated that the response from colleagues was disinterest or apathy. Some teachers speculated that this was due to lack of experience or training in social justice issues, but mostly they felt that their teacher colleagues didn't feel that it was an important part of the job. Most of the relationships teachers reported finding on staff was due to personal connections with people, rather than based on pedagogy or practice.

Given the institutional climate and the lack of support for new teachers, it is perhaps unsurprising that teachers acquainted with the system are reluctant to teach anti-oppressively. Constance and Jayani indicated that anti-oppressive education is a relatively new concept, and that veteran teachers may not be well versed in anti-oppression. Constance articulated her perception that experienced teachers may be "set in their ways" and not willing to readily change their practice.

Support was the greatest single factor identified in feeling able to make change or do nontraditional teaching in their classrooms. Much of the way that teachers
experienced support was individual, if present at all. The teachers in this study reported that community was unavailable to them, and in their requests for assistance, were given ambiguous feedback to their teaching that neither forbade nor condoned anti-oppressive teaching. They also perceived little modeling or discussion happening about social justice issues in schools. This isolation was again related significantly to the nature of temporary or teacher-on-call work and the individualistic, competitive nature of schools, where teachers are neither encouraged to work together nor discuss their politics. This is also replicated in the liberal notion of multiculturalism that is available in schools – an approach that centres around individual experience in a tokenistic fashion.

**Difficulties of the Job**

A major category of experiences that effected new teachers’ freedom to enact anti-oppressive pedagogies were the practical difficulties of the teaching profession. This included time constraints, being able to participate fully in the school community, and finding a balance among the assessment, evaluation and curricular demands of the job. In general, the interview participants described feeling overwhelmed by the requirements of the job and the day-to-day expectations.

One of the major barriers to the enactment of anti-oppressive pedagogy was negotiating the sea of tasks that teachers perform in the course of a day. For some, it was the feeling of being “burdened” by other administrative tasks. The participants identified this as a factor throughout the school system, but as a particular issue for new teachers who are likely still in a period of intense learning. Corky, Phillip and Constance cited Individualized Educational Plans, paperwork, report cards and meetings as factors that
added pressure to their workload and often nudged out the non-curricular teaching they were endeavoring to bring to the centre.

Sophia, Constance, Phillip and Corky also described the overwhelming quantity of information that is available in schools as being a barrier to finding particular information. Corky, for example, identified the disorganization of schools as hindering her efforts at feeling informed, stating:

I just go into the staffroom and there’s paper everywhere, like there’s this, this, this, and I don’t even know, like, I just barely come in, eat and leave... I don’t even know where to go to find information about how to get support or who can I talk to outside of my school... We don’t even have a list of what’s in our science room.

In addition, teachers reported feeling isolated as a result of being a new teacher, and as a result of the decentralization of schools and the impenetrable face of the school board. Phillip articulated this alienation:

as a new teacher you might not know the ins and outs, and what is available, you might not know who to ask... and there’s a union out there... but who are they, what can they do for you... the school board can sometimes appear to be a monolithic institution.

In this way, it is difficult for teachers to know what questions to ask, even if they do know where to find the answers.

Participants also identified the pressure for accountability as a barrier. Constance articulates this as “I’m really terrified of not meeting the standards of being a teacher, and also meeting the standards of where my students should be at the end of the year, that kind of stuff just really kind of scares me.” This notion was shared amongst the participants who taught in mainstream classrooms. However, two of the participants were teachers in alternative or district classes that enroll students with learning exceptionalities, and these teachers described being “liberated from the curriculum”
Phillip and Corky found that in classes where social skills and life skills were the priority, it was easier to embed anti-oppressive curriculum throughout the school day. This focus away from academics still met with resistance from parents, but the teachers found they had little trouble justifying or explaining their curricular choices.

**The Risks of Anti-oppressive Teaching**

All teachers articulated a fear of punishment or loss of work due to the implementation of their philosophical or political beliefs in the classroom. There were two main ways that this manifested: individually in relationships with peers or parents, and systemically. Both included a strong belief that the school board would not support their teaching or back them up. Jayani told the story of how she received a great deal of backlash for using books that represented same-sex parents. Several parents visited her classroom and argued that she was using inappropriate or “controversial” materials. In appealing to the administrator for support, she was told: “That’s why I didn’t talk about controversial things in my classroom” and that if she chose to read nontraditional books in her class that she would just “have to deal with it.”

Sam, Sophia and Phillip indicated that they did not feel that parents were antagonistic toward their teaching practices, but were clear to state that this was in part due to the parent’s own alienation from the system because of language, colonialism, being overwhelmed with the task of being a parent as well as other institutionalized factors that oppressed the parents themselves. In these cases, the lack of negative response may not have been outright support for the teaching, but may have been compounded by the parents’ lack of ability to challenge or address the educational system.
The perception of some participants was that the Board and government would be even more intolerant towards anti-oppressive teachers. In describing the effects that an organized group of teachers practicing anti-oppressively would have on the district, Phillip states:

They'd shut you down, you'd all be fired. You know, the powers that be wouldn't stand for that. I'm not trying to make it sound like a conspiracy or something like that but it's just a reality, like the school is an institution paid by the state so if everyone's trying to raise an army to subvert the state, using very militaristic terms here, but it wouldn't take long before you were turfed, or you know, it wouldn't be allowed.

For teachers who believed in anti-oppressive educational practices, this constituted a very difficult choice. All participants articulated the internal struggle they faced in sticking to their beliefs despite opposition and resistance, although in different ways. For some, it was a highly personalized experience of conflicting values. Constance tells the story of one of her University instructors who had described two choices: sitting back and letting injustice happen, or doing something about it and being prepared for the consequences. She found upon entry to the school system, however, that:

I was really scared that I would cause trouble and the board would, like the school would just hate me for causing trouble and like getting, getting the board into it or something and then I would be like blacklisted from the school. I was really afraid of that, but ever since then I kept thinking of what [instructor] said and I thought god, I've always considered myself to be somebody who would do something about it but when faced with the actual situation I was really sad to think that I didn't. I really didn't do anything I was too afraid of what was going to happen, the consequence, I thought oh my god would I lose my job?

This is a clear illustration of how teachers experience the pressure to conform. The fear of losing jobs, respect and support was woven throughout all of the interviews. Also was the sense of self-doubt that accompanied challenges to their autonomy in the classroom. This was often expressed as disappointment in themselves, the feeling of being “stuck
between a rock and a hard place.” Teachers in this position must choose between possibly bringing repercussions on themselves or the knowledge that they did not act in the interests of their students, and worse, may have participated in reinforcing hegemonic ideologies. As illustrated by the quote from Constance above, there is also a high level of internalized accountability – represented by the fear of “getting the board into trouble” where she fears not only reprimand for her own actions, but also worries about jeopardizing her employers.

For the teachers in this study, such experiences both encouraged them to persevere with anti-oppressive teaching because of the clear need and dissuaded them from pursuing such practices openly. For many, it also called into question their efficacy as a teacher, and about whether they should, in fact, be teachers. Constance articulated this as being “terrified of not meeting the standards of being a teacher” along with a sense that she was alone in having doubts about her ability to conform to the system.

Oppressive School Practices

With regards to the actual school climate, all participants described the current lack of anti-oppressive practice in schools. This climate was difficult for them not only because of the lack of modeling, but also because they found that it was increasingly difficult to talk about their own practices. In many instances, this difficulty was linked to overtly racist, sexist or colonialist assumptions on the part of colleagues and administration. The participants described situations in which school climate affected their relationships with peers, or worse, silenced them completely in building supportive communities on staff.
In the individual interviews, Sam, Jayani, Sophia and Constance described situations where they had been faced with racist, sexist or heterosexist comments in schools. In those situations, the conversation was between preservice teacher and sponsor teacher or new teacher and administrator. In both of these instances, the teachers felt powerless to respond, found that they felt increasingly isolated in their practice, or worse, conflicted about standing up for their beliefs despite the retribution they anticipated. Sam and Sophia described paternalistic or disruptive practices on the part of administration that hindered the building of community amongst teachers.

In these situations, overt efforts were made to clarify or emphasize the power differential within the school, and to increase competition between teachers. In one case, a participant was warned by his administrator not to get involved in social justice work at the board level because it would be “bad for [his] career” (Phillip).

The participants in this study also described sexist, racist attitudes that played out in teachers’ relationships with students. This often happened in a passive way, with teachers not challenging gendered or racist assumptions about students, or using materials and resources that supported stereotypes. In one instance, Jayani told the story about how a certain sexist practice was considered beyond discussion because it was “tradition”, and that she and other teachers were rebuffed when they challenged its use in the school. Jayani’s efforts to challenge the sexist values demonstrated by her school were trumped by hegemonic “truths” that undermined her resistance. For example, she encountered
disagreements about whether an event's tradition made it defensible, and struggled against notions of “women’s work” within the school. Her complaints were laughed off or ignored by administration. This demonstrated to her that the school climate was unaccepting of counter-hegemonic practices, and that her efforts to change static concepts like curriculum or teachers’ roles would be similarly unsupported.

In many ways, the experiences of the teachers in this regard were indicative of institutionalized issues. For example, the lack of nonwhite or aboriginal teachers sends a clear message about the kind of knowledge that is valued in schools. Similarly, available resources, textbooks, and curriculum rarely stray from dominant ideologies. Corky indicated that she was able to sleuth out what kind of discourse went on in classrooms where she was a teacher-on-call by looking at the books and the setup of the classroom. Teachers may resist anti-oppressive teaching because of the difficulties of doing so, given the nature of classroom teaching and lack of critical resources, or may choose traditional class organizations and resources because of their lack of interest in anti-oppression?

**Teacher Education**

In the interviews, one theme that was woven throughout was a discussion of teacher education programs. The participants in this study were largely critical of their teacher education programs for many of the same reasons that they were critical of the teaching profession as a whole. The focus, in their experience, was squarely on conformity and it devalued critical exchange.

Jayani and Sophia, however, indicated that they had enjoyed their experience in teacher education, and had found that it was consistent with their teaching goals in terms of modeling respectful, open-ended teaching. They found their programs supportive,
engaging and that the programs positively affected their perception of their own agency and convictions. These teachers felt encouraged and supported in the process of learning to teach. Criticisms of the program were generally focused on the practical needs of new teachers. Despite their praise for the program, Jayani and Sophia still felt that they were generally unprepared for the classroom. While they learned a great deal about what kind of teacher they aspired to be, once in the classroom they were ill prepared for the demands of the job.

For the other teachers in the study, teacher education represented an uncritical approach to the role of teacher that bordered on oppressive. Constance, Phillip, Sam and Corky reported feeling silenced by the conformist nature of the course, and felt as though the course materials and expectations uncritically reinforced normative values. It is important to state that five of the six participants were enrolled in a cohort – a program that grouped preservice teachers together in a “learning community”. While the aforementioned teachers found this a community building, positive modeling experience, many other participants found this structure oppressive and focused on conformity. Sam articulates this experience of having to ‘fit in’ clearly:

I decided I’ve got to shut up I can’t, I was you know, it’s just hurting me. If I want to get through this I’ve got to protect myself, like psychologically and emotionally and spiritually, I had to just bite it, suck it back and just go ‘ok I can do this’ and find another place to get my needs met, like it wasn’t going to happen there I had to come to grips with that.

Constance described this experience as not having been open to individual differences, and that there was little space for criticism. She stated that: “I got the sense that everything has to be totally rosy or else - problems, or you’re not really going to fit in...I just do feel like every single day I had to be somebody I wasn’t.” Therefore, the program
indicated to her that success meant subsuming her personality in order to meet the
demands of community. This was echoed by Corky, who described situations in which
overt lessons were taught about conformity. She was repeatedly told that her personal
presentation was unacceptable, and that she "stood out" in a negative way within the
cohort. This message was reinforced by her preservice colleagues, visiting lecturers and
instructors, who linked teaching success with having a traditional presentation and
avoiding curriculum that was ‘controversial’. She again described the feeling of having
not only to represent herself within rigid appearance and behavior constraints, but also a
duty to represent her university in a similar way. This was very powerful for Corky, as
she knew that she was being evaluated by the same individuals who were giving her these
messages. Constance was also continually reminded of conformity through the
competitive actions of her peers. While cohorts can attempt to create learning
communities and foster relationships as well as dialogical learning, they can also be
barriers to dissent. Being a participant in a group can carry the danger of
homogenization.

A common barrier for new teachers in the school system was a perceived lack of
practical skills in the classroom. For most of the participants in this study, the training
that they received during their teacher education program was very specific around
curricular issues, and while they all identified appreciating the social justice component,
found that it was not integrated throughout the program. Specific issues that they faced
in the curriculum included a lack of information about class oppression and colonialism,
as well as incomplete knowledge about the real conditions of schools. On this latter
point, Constance indicated that she, among others, felt unprepared for the multiple roles
that teachers play in school communities, and a lack of real strategies to deal with the conditions of students' lives:

[being a teacher-on-call] hit me so hard because when I finally did see it, and when I did witness [poverty and racism in schools] it I was like, ‘Wow.’ I never knew it was like this, like I read about it, but when you read about something it’s on paper, and it’s not anything, it’s not a tangible thing.

This leads to a situation where there is clearly a “right” answer, but by withholding strategies and criticism, and overemphasizing process, preservice teachers are cut adrift between unlearning and reconceptualizing their role in anti-oppressive teaching.

“Solitary Subversion”: Theoretical Climate in Schools

The participants in this study also identified a number of theoretical restraints in relation to their teaching attempts, or their assessment of the climate for their social justice efforts. Participants’ recognition of the climate in Vancouver area schools included an awareness of liberal pluralism in school policies and practices. This manifests in condoning “diversity day” as sufficient, while protecting dominant discursive frameworks, and in a lack of support for initiatives that use anti-oppressive practice to engage with students. Sam suggests:

[Anti-oppressive teaching resources and research] doesn’t get used, ok, it doesn’t get used, ok, do I have to tell you that, this is not getting fuckin’ used and it just bugs me…and instead we focus on the reading, writing and numeracy in elementary. I mean, it bugs me.

The participants in this study spoke to the ways this acted on their agency, indicating that Social Responsibility curriculum is used in schools as the only way to address sexism, homophobia, racism, class oppression and dis/ability issues. This affected teachers in
two ways: The Social Responsibility curriculum\textsuperscript{22} was seen as the only required response to social justice issues, and the downloading of responsibility for implementation on teachers without support.

When teachers and administrators behaved as though the Social Responsibility curriculum was sufficient in addressing social justice issues, Corky indicated that the results were a shallow way of dealing with systemic or ongoing problems:

There are a lot of schools that I've gone into that on the surface value they say that they're trying to, but it's very surface value so they'll say that this is what you have to say, but there's no meaning behind it, there's no context...and I find that there's a lot of schools that either shy away from it, will only teach it as a surface value.

Some participants identified that available programs had no "teeth," or did not effect systemic change, because it became ghettoized either as part of the Personal Planning or as part of the Social Responsibility curricula.\textsuperscript{23} Sophia described how this can serve to isolate social justice work, or to relegate it to the margins in terms of importance or resources:

In terms of the goal for the school, for us right now we have literacy, math and social responsibility. And for literacy for the primary grades we have a block that is not touched between recess and lunch you can't plan assemblies, you can't plan field trips it's dedicated to that but we don't think to give the same value to the other areas around social responsibility or in terms of anti-oppressive education in general.

This perception of anti-oppressive curriculum or teaching as secondary or specific to certain subject areas has two effects: it is devalued and is not integrated into the school culture. This devaluing means that teachers are not pursuing it with the same commitment, and it is not a primary factor in how teachers organize the school. The participants in this study identified the fact that schools are not taking anti-oppressive initiatives seriously. This is due to the fact that the programs available are unsuccessful,
either because they are "one size fits all top-down" (Phillip) initiatives, or are "kind of hokey" (Corky). The perception of the participants in their schools is also that teachers and administration feel that anti-oppressive work "takes away from academic time" (Phillip). The result of these factors is that teachers are left to develop and implement their own programming to address anti-oppression. This is problematic because, according to the participants in this study, not everyone perceives anti-oppressive work in the same way. Constance argued that in both the teacher education program and the schools in which she has been a teacher-on-call, people are aware of anti-oppressive pedagogy or multicultural education, but it is not well integrated. She indicated further that learning about social justice issues in teacher education was a positive experience, but neither her preservice teacher colleagues nor colleagues in schools placed a priority on anti-oppressive teaching. She articulated this difficulty as:

I don’t think that a lot of people in my [teacher education program] really cared. To be honest, I just don’t think that they really paid attention that much, they didn’t really take that stuff to heart, about what was going on, it was just another course, interesting to learn about and that was it. It wasn’t anything that really sparked a fire in them. Honestly, I could just tell because, I mean, it sparked a fire in me.

Constance’s experience in teacher education led her to believe that few other teachers were interested in pursuing social justice pedagogies, and was a foreshadowing of the kind of teaching she could expect in schools.

Given that they are acting on their own beliefs, this also means that teachers worried about being reprimanded for their practice by administration or parents, and felt unsupported by a program to which they can point as proof of the necessity of their work. Phillip alludes to the lack of grounding in provincial and /or district programming:
Teachers like to be able to say that we’re trying to address the whole child and make them into good citizens but that’s not what the School Act is about. That’s not what the BC Ministry of Education is about so in a way we’re kind of, not we’re kidding ourselves, but we’re really having to be subversive, but it’s a solitary subversion.

The participants articulated that in response they tended to use “teachable moments” to address issues that arose in lieu of actual programming. This makes the programming optional, which intersects with the daily constraints on teachers to cover curriculum, management and professional duties. All teachers in the study identified that Social Responsibility was a goal of their schools or a focus of the district, but few found that this translated into support or direction in their day-to-day teaching. This is due, in part, to the fact that Social Responsibility often serves as a replacement for anti-oppressive practice rather than a mechanism for its implementation. However, all teachers identified it as a useful inroad to more radical practice. Corky noted that:

It was really difficult knowing how to talk. I mean talking the way that I do and then realizing that the teacher that I’m subbing for wouldn’t speak the same way or address the same kind of issues is always hard because I was never sure what I was allowed to say, if I was going to get in trouble.

This is compounded by a lack of resources in the school that facilitate anti-oppressive teaching and a lack of district or school support. Given that teachers are placed in the position of having to continually invent practices that address the issues they see in their schools and that meet the needs of their students, the problem of implementation is complicated by ambiguous pressures from parents, colleagues and administration.

Most participants identified feeling mixed pressure due to their own commitment to doing anti-oppressive work alongside the pressure to conform to curricular and moral frameworks. “It seems like it would be a lot of pressure to have an environment that deals with all the ‘isms while also teaching all the subjects and I mean, parents and
society sort of expect you to" (Constance). This climate encourages the teachers to use “multiculturalism” and “social responsibility” as frameworks for their practice, even though they are critical of such discourses as “passive,” tolerance-based, ghettoized in tokenistic practices (Constance), or because it does not meet their anti-oppressive instructional needs. For example, Phillip stated:

[the bullying umbrella] is useless, it’s not specific enough...social responsibility does have the component of diversity...I mean, that’s an important discourse as well but you can’t just leave it at the level of being respectful or ‘don’t bully’.

All of the teachers in this study reported that they expanded upon these themes instead of, or in addition to, developing new ones.

Sam indicated that she was aware of how colonialism affected others’ perceptions of her objectivity in the system: “there’s lots of mistrust [of aboriginal teachers] like can she really do this, or can he really teach this stuff, and you know, keep the canon going for us? Can we, you know, trust somebody who’s been oppressed by this system?”

and also the desire to generalize anti-oppressive initiatives by addressing multiculturalism, for example, instead of colonialism: “teachers go ‘oh why aboriginal, why not multicultural, oh you know, we’ve got all these Indo-Canadian kids, how come we’re not doing something on that?’” (Sam).

Furthermore, the initiatives developed by the Ministry of Education or by local boards tend to be inconsistently applied. This is due, in part, to a lack of teacher interest but is also due to lack of implementation time and funding. According to Phillip:

It’s the provincial government who’s dropping the ball on these things, they do these empty PR exercises like the safe school stuff and then they don’t give enough funding to, to school boards so that they can have, like a safe schools coordinator so they can have someone who drives it, some implementation time, training for staff, you know, and the stuff that does come out is so wishy-washy or it’s a, like a one morning pro-d, like a wish and a hope sort of thing, you know.
For those who chose to be covert in their anti-oppressive teaching practice, there were many reasons: the fear of being pigeonholed as "the -isms girl" until they had established themselves among their peers as competent, "good" teachers first (Corky); fear of not being supported by peers (Sophia, Phillip, Jayani, Constance); and fear of being fired (Corky, Phillip, Constance). There was also the sentiment that being covert meant that they could get away with more, as well as the feeling that their political integrity was not compromised. This speaks to both the commitment of teachers to social justice work despite the multiple barriers, as well as to the strength of the system in limiting pedagogical choices.

Conclusion / Discussion

The teachers in this study articulated their personal politics as being firmly grounded in, and often as a response to, their beliefs about teaching. Their commitment to "changing the world" often drew them into teaching, and once there, this commitment was seriously tested. The teachers in this study fell into three main groups of pedagogical or political beliefs: those who identified that they were still working to crystallize their politics through their teaching practice and were seeking space within the educational system to be representative teachers who were open to difference and collaborative classroom processes; teachers who were clear in their political direction and conviction, and were proceeding with creating respectful, equitable space that honored difference; and the third, teachers who were activists prior to coming to education and had an explicit goal of systemic change. Sumara and Luce-Kapler (1996) describe the "fictive" identity that new teachers sometimes invoke in order to make sense of the transitional time
between being a preservice teacher and an experienced-teacher. The authors describe the
difficulty of negotiating an identity that is “endowed with a meaning not of one’s own
making” (69). In this sense, Sumara and Luce-Kapler refer to the creation of an
individual identity that is enmeshed within a “communal identity”. The communal
identity of “teacher” is imbued with historical and moral implications (Britzman, 1991),
within which it is difficult to maintain individual beliefs and identity.

This component of the interviews articulated the teachers’ perceptions that there
are many systemic factors that create difficulties in the classroom. They described
schools that are isolating and indifferent to teachers-on-call. This is difficult to navigate,
especially given the nature of schools as busy, overwhelming places. Added to this is the
high level of tasks that are embedded in the daily life of teachers. The majority of
teachers in this study indicated being overwhelmed with the administrative or
bureaucratic components of the job, and fell victim as a result to a focus on curriculum,
and away from anti-oppressive teaching. Sachs (2001) indicates how the move toward
teacher professionalism has been concurrent with an increasing hierarchy in schools, and
the experience of the teachers that related to bureaucratic work reflects an increased focus
on accountability and a decentralization of school and school boards (151). Kelly and
Minnes Brandes (2001) add to this description the increasing matrix of accountability that
new teachers experience including evaluation, surveillance and the development of
management and assessment strategies of their own (4).

Inadvertently, the teachers in the study found themselves doing the kind of
teaching they noticed in the system around them: one where anti-oppression happened
only in discrete spaces in the curriculum, or in response to crises in the classroom. These
practical considerations affected not only their ability to enact the anti-oppressive teaching they aspired to, but also curtailed their opportunities to seek out community, peers, or support systems within the school. This was partly due to the lack of instruction they received in their teacher education programs (Rosenberg, 1996), and to the nature of trying to effect systemic change as an individual within that system. Scanlon (1993) describes the difficulties of presenting one anti-oppressive course in the midst of traditional academia, and the challenge of teaching feminist curriculum that will “carry over” into the students’ more traditional and oppressive courses. Her work indicates how both activist instructors and students isolated in a single course can struggle to generalize their learning and teaching to create sufficient momentum within the institution (8).

In addition to this, the teachers in the study found that the conditions of schools that replicate hegemonic power dynamics between teachers and students was also in effect between administrators and teachers and among teachers (Sachs, 2001; Ferfolja, 1998). This happened in explicitly racist, sexist, homophobic dialogue in schools, but also in more subtle ways, through disinterest and indifference towards anti-oppression as a school goal (Acker, 1987; Briskin, 1990; Coulter, 1995; Dei, 2000; Graveline, 1994; Scanlon, 1993). Again, without the benefits of strong relationships on school staff, or the explicit support of their peers and administrators, five of the six new teachers in this study found that they drove their political teaching underground in an effort to avoid conflict or reprimand (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995). This did not, however, alleviate the fears they held about being challenged by administration, peers, parents and sometimes students (Ferfolja, 1998; Graveline, 1994; Miller Marsh, 2002). The climate in schools sent a clear message to new teachers about the values of schools, and what the
expectations were of their teaching practice. This was repeatedly interpreted as a focus on conformity and fitting in, which corresponded to their fears of external accountability (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Groundwater-Smith and Sachs, 2002; Lunn and Bishop, 2003).

In this vein, support was the greatest single factor identified in feeling able to make change or do nontraditional teaching in their classrooms. Much of the way that teachers experienced support was individual, if present at all. The teachers in this study reported that when seeking support, they were given ambiguous feedback that neither forbade nor condoned anti-oppressive teaching. Most of the relationships teachers reported finding on staff was due to personal connections with people, rather than based on pedagogy or practice. This isolation was again related significantly to the nature of teacher-on-call or temporary work, but was also linked to the feeling that there was little modeling or discussion happening about social justice issues in schools. This is due, in part, to the individualistic, competitive nature of schools where teachers are not encouraged to work together or discuss their politics, as well as in the liberal pluralistic notion of anti-oppression that is available in schools that centres around individual experience. Mohanty's (1990) writings support this analysis of mainstream education as "managing" diversity rather than engaging with or dismantling oppression (556). Kelly (2004-2005) identifies this effect by explicating how the provincial "Social Responsibility" curriculum replaces overt discussions on social justice, and favors conformity and assessment over an understanding of the nature and manifestation of oppression in schools (5). This particular discourse is dangerous in that it categorizes, minimizes and blankets oppression in an individualistic framework. For the teachers in this study, it is perhaps unsurprising that these two factors are related — in a pedagogy
that “adds on” or personalizes oppression, the possibility of teachers finding space to talk about systemic change is similarly perceived as an individual endeavor – one that occurs in classrooms and in response to particular events, and therefore at the teachers’ own risk. Darder et al (2003) point out the ways that this process reinforces existing power relations in schools and attempts to undermine concrete action. They clarify the importance of seeking pedagogy that resists and challenges traditional educational discourses (14). The teachers in this study were aware of how this process not only threatened the potential for anti-oppressive practice, but also their prospects for employment.

In conclusion, the teachers in this study identified a wide range of factors that affected their ability to engage in anti-oppressive teaching. Many of them point to the current perception of teaching as a solitary, individual process in which there is little sense of collaborative goals, either around learning, organization, leadership or teaching practice. As new teachers in this system, they found that many factors were alienating and isolating, and these factors are compounded by the status of “new teacher” for reasons related to confidence, familiarity, knowledge and experience. The next chapter will address how new teachers resist these barriers and continue to teach for social justice in their schools and classrooms.
CHAPTER 5 - Teachers Resisting: Anti-oppressive Strategies

Resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces. Resistance that is random and isolated is clearly not as effective as that which is mobilized through systemic politicized practices of teaching and learning. Uncovering and reclaiming subjugated knowledge is one way to lay claims to alternative histories. But these knowledges need to be understood and defined pedagogically, as questions of strategy and practice as well as of scholarship, in order to transform educational institutions radically. (Mohanty, 1990).

This chapter addresses the ways that new elementary school teachers find space to do anti-oppressive work. Given the multiple barriers that teachers face as outlined in Chapter 4, it is imperative to also represent teachers’ agency, activism and resistance to these barriers. The teachers in this study found ways to create anti-oppressive space within their working lives by developing strategies that revisited schools as sites of community, that acknowledged and represented difference, and that used critical skill development. What I found was that in each category, the participants enacted practices that addressed individual manifestations of oppression as well as more transformative approaches. The participants’ choices of approach were influenced by grade level taught, experience, social location, and the connection of the participants to their schools and union.

As outlined in the theoretical framework section, I will be using the literature and theory of anti-oppressive education, and the work of Kumashiro (2002) and Young (1990) to categorize the strategies that the respondents described. As will be analysed in the discussion section, the teachers’ strategies were mostly described by the categories
"Education For the Other" and "Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering" (Kumashiro, 2002).

The Culture of Classroom: Revisiting Schools as Sites of Community

Representing Community: Creating Dialogical Space in the Classroom

The participants in this study indicated that a widely-used strategy was to create space for students to choose their own representation and to share their perspectives in non-judgmental space. This often was enacted by encouraging students to listen to different points of view, even if they did not agree. This discourse of "difference is OK" was prevalent throughout the interviews, either in a proactive way initiated by teachers or in response to situations created by students. The teachers in this study identified that "teachable moments" or students' own questions were often a good entry point to discussions of difference. The participants identified that in order to facilitate such discussions, it was necessary to create space that allowed for expressions of difference, and respect for different opinions. Five of the six teachers in this study described setting examples with their own behavior, or treating their students with respect. According to Sophia, "...what it comes down to especially in a primary classroom is how the children treat each other and how I want them to feel about how I treat them". This also included affirming ideals such as "having joy and laughter in my classroom."

The teachers in the study also articulated that encouraging and supporting students within their relationships with other students was another way to create transformative space in their classrooms. They named this as developing or building community with their students. Teachers who used this strategy focused on collaborative work in their classrooms and the corollary of leadership and modeling to undermine
traditional competitive educational discourses. Teachers encouraged group work, mentoring, problem solving and collaboration in their class as well as by explicitly stating to their students:

I really value people who share and are kind and generous with everything about learning...so if you’re really kind and caring and you’re open to learning you’re going to do way better with me (Sam).

Within this, the participants also identified using class meetings and student leadership as an instructional strategy. In this framework, students have the opportunity to learn from each other, and to struggle with each other to build community. Part of this strategy was the commitment on the part of the teacher to respecting the process and learning of the students. Sophia notes:

It’s about allowing them the space to discuss in class and not being so attached to my watch and ‘oh we need to get through this and we need to get through that’ and giving them just that space and that time that if you’re constantly on agenda they don’t feel like the openness is there for them to...be.

Many of these strategies were teacher-centred and the opportunities came at the direction or discretion of the teacher and were shaped by teacher behavior such as: “how you speak, what you allow in your classroom, how you allow children to speak to each other, what books you allow in your classroom” (Corky). In this way, teachers felt that they were creating space where students could express their own differences. While these strategies were aimed at creating a community of students and teachers together based around goals of mutual respect, they often do not challenge institutional notions of power, nor expose invisible privilege or oppression. They also risk romanticizing the concept of “community” and the ways that communities can serve to silence through membership and conformity.
The third way that teachers worked to create a safe, affirming learning space was by modeling positive, respectful relationships with their students. For many of the teachers in this study, this was an essential component of creating an anti-oppressive classroom. By working to build community with their students, the teachers in the study endeavor to develop relationships built on mutual respect and trust. Sam noted that:

You can really build some good relationships with the students and really build a nice, intimate kind of community with them... I tell them right off the bat ‘I’m not going to lie to you, you don’t lie to me, you know, stay away from my stuff, I stay away from yours... I’ll be your advocate. You just, I’ll advocate for you.

In this way, Sam is exposing the criteria for the kind of community she desires with her students, and for building a trusting community. The teachers who used this strategy relayed that within this kind of community, students were empowered to ask questions, ask for help, and to take on leadership roles. However, notions of “community” and “safety” can be liberal concepts that, unless seriously interrogated, risk serving already dominant groups within heterogeneous communities.

**Challenging Community: De-centring Teacher-Student Relationships**

Teachers whose approaches were more transformative in this aspect worked to undermine traditional or historical relationships in schools. The teachers enacted this strategy by incorporating their own lives into the curriculum. “...[the students] are able to see that I’m somebody who has my own ideas and I have certain beliefs for certain reasons and I’m a human being and I’m a teacher... so I’m multifaceted rather than this cardboard cutout of a teacher” (Corky). Nearly all teachers in the study described locating their personal life within their teaching as an anti-oppressive strategy. This occurred in a number of ways, including incorporating their own values and personal life
in their teaching by engaging with students in open, honest discussion, and in bringing their beliefs and experience to the classroom: “I’m a big believer in fairness where they talk through stuff. Students are bringing their experience, I’m bringing mine, let’s hash it out, and come to some agreement” (Phillip). The other component of this strategy included reaching out to students and including their social locations or identities in discussions. The undermining of traditional teacher roles was a significant way that the participants reworked their own authority in the classroom. It was also accompanied by the teachers’ conviction in their own values and beliefs. One teacher in particular used her physical difference to initiate conversation and engaged with students honestly about her tattoos to talk about personal choice and representation, as well as difference. In this way, they are endeavoring to make visible the power dynamics and to expose the mechanics of constructive struggle.

Other ways they identified their rejection of authority was in exposing the mistakes they made, in holding themselves accountable to the same criteria that they required of students, and identifying and building class rules as a group. Sophia described her attempts at de-centering herself as the teacher:

...eventually I’m the authority figure in the classroom but I don’t want it to be that it’s the teacher at the top and the kids are subservient ...it’s a way for them to take some responsibility for running things and knowing that they are part of the power structure and it’s not me calling the shots all the time.

In recognizing that she holds the ultimate power, Sophia understands that her offers of authority to students is possibly limited, but continues to endeavor towards a more equitable relationship within this power structure.

The teachers in this study also indicated that they worked towards a more inclusive community by breaking down barriers related to the roles of teachers, parents,
and students. This was done by including and welcoming families into the classroom as experts, by recognizing and undermining the ways that schools often serve to alienate communities and families, and the kinds of knowledge that are valued and important. In this effort, teachers worked to view the curriculum in light of the communities in which they worked. In this effort, they aimed to make visible the ways that power operated within the school system, but did little to change the preexisting conditions of schools that can cause power differentials to continue to operate outside of their classrooms.

Sam articulated her practice of personalizing parent–teacher relationships in the following quote:

I knew everything about them, what they were doing and what was happening in their lives, and I made a point of meeting all their parents, even if I had to go to their homes because it was more convenient or I’d meet them somewhere at a neutral site if they wanted just to say hello and just say you know, it was always you know “you’re just mad, are you mad at my son or daughter” ... and I’m just like “no, I just want to say hello...find out what you want for them, what [are] your hopes and dreams for them, that kind of thing.

This included working with parents to name goals for students, and to have open, realistic discussions with parents about students. In this way, teachers broke down traditional power relationships between marginalized parents and teachers. However, liberal pluralist approaches tend not to initiate structural change unless paired with support in addressing actual oppression in daily life. In a critique of power-sharing strategies, Oyler and Becker (1997) indicate that, “there is a danger that sharing authority is itself ultimately a power move, that it conceals some deeper way in which the teacher imposes, some deeper way in which the teacher maintains control irrespective of students’ agendas” (p. 456). Using this analysis, we can see how it has the potential to omit concrete, productive alternatives.
This strategy also included teachers’ relationships with other teachers. In attempting to break down the ways that teachers are isolated in their classrooms, teachers who were successful at addressing their own isolation and generally were more supported in their practice had extended their teaching outside of the classroom, and sometimes outside of the school to board and union activism. Their strategies included resisting dominant discourses about what teachers should be teaching by going ‘under cover’ and persevering with their beliefs in less obvious ways (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995). In their study, Clandinin and Connelly identified that for teachers who had a difficult time matching their beliefs to the expectations placed on them, that one strategy was to carry on with their practice, while telling administration and parents a different story about their daily work.

“It’s OK that it’s different, isn’t it?” – Acknowledging and Representing Difference

Representing Difference: Using Representative Resources in the Classroom

Phillip, Sam, Constance, Corky, Sophia and Jayani described engaging with students through curriculum, classroom expectations, and through inclusive and representative goals. These strategies spoke fundamentally to the recognition and addressing of inequality and oppression. Anti-oppressive practices fell within this range of practices.

All participants used strategies aimed at inclusion or representation of difference in their classrooms. While the implementation varied, the focus of this strategy was to undermine the reproductive effect of dominant curricular materials and to use their position as teacher to invite, encourage, and express their belief that all children, their families and their culture needed to be reflected in the delivery of curriculum. For some,
this took the form of the educational discourse of “inclusion.” The teachers in the study discussed their strategies mostly in terms of their own behavior and posture of respect for the opinions and choices of all students. This manifested in their classroom work in two ways: in their creation of opportunities for students to express themselves and in their modeling of respectful interactions.

The first way they chose to do this was to include resources that represent or include diversity. Corky illustrated how she included and discussed diversity using books:

I’ve got this big book on religions I can’t wait to bring it into a classroom, you know, ‘this is all the different kinds of religions that are out there, and you could believe it or don’t, you don’t have to believe in anything!’ but here you go.

Many participants described using inclusive resources, and all identified that they used resources or materials in their classroom that represented difference based on the need for discussion or as part of an overt lesson on difference, often taking leadership from the students: “We just talked about [Heather Has Two Mommies] in the context of what they responded to in the story” (Jayani). In explaining a picture that had ambiguously gendered parents in it, one participant relayed her exchange with her students as: “...it’s just a different way of looking at it, there’s a good chance that this is a family with two moms, it’s not the same as your family, but it’s ok that it’s different, isn’t it?” (Sophia). This included having materials that overtly talked about difference, as well as including “books that are written by visible minorities and reading books with kids of all different skin colours and come from different places” (Jayani). These approaches or materials would be integrated throughout the year: “...not one week[of multiculturalism] but just as
part of the normal classroom routine they're recognizing celebrations of different, of all children, but not just on one day” (Jayani).

For the teachers who espoused more multiculturalist or pluralist approaches to anti-oppressive education, this included discussing the nature of difference, and often, equating difference with sameness, in their desire to “make all children feel like they belong” and “represent all children in [their] class” (Jayani).

**Problematizing Difference: What is Difference?**

Many teachers expanded their use of resources to have critical discussions with their students about representation, or used multiple resources to help students to draw their own conclusions about representation. Corky describes her practice as:

> In the class they had to go through [a] picture book and figure out what is happening, why are all the women in dresses, and what colour are most characters...when we started going through it, I said, ‘Are we talking about sexism, are we talking about racism?’

In this example, Corky is inviting discussion not only about different kinds of oppression, but is helping her students to identify it in dominant representations. Another way that participants used resources was by pairing traditional curricular texts and then inviting comparison to texts that represent a different approach to the subject matter. Sam describes how she used *Copper Sunrise*, an arguably paternalistic novel about Canadian colonization and describes a friendship between a white boy who has emigrated to Canada and a First Nations boy in Newfoundland. She then teaches *My Name is Seepeetza*, a book written by a First Nations author that describes one girl’s experience in the residential school system in British Columbia. The students are then encouraged to draw their own conclusions about the differences:
Those are the times to just turn it into teachable moments...I think that’s when teachers need to be really conscious of ‘ok, so this book is really bad stuff and it just perpetuates particular stereotypes, something frozen in time in some white person’s memory’...then read another really nice, well written piece...I had to model [the process of thinking critically] too, so I couldn’t go ‘um, this is really messed up’.

The participants articulated an understanding that this strategy also required a classroom climate that allowed for more open discussion of such material, and for broader discussions of difference:

Our overarching umbrella for the year is different ways of viewing something so everything that we are doing in class we have to try to figure out a different way to view it. So whatever your opinion is, try to think of the opposite, you know, so it’s about you’re allowed to have your personal opinion as long as you don’t put down some else’s opinion (Corky).

Teachers described engaging with students in the process of their own learning. This was again, largely a strategy used by intermediate teachers. In this endeavor, teachers taught lessons that were explicitly based in discussing representation through the presentation of contradictory and complementary resources. “I would take books...and find contradictory material...and we would take it apart and just sort of go through it and then take that and pair it with the curriculum” (Sam). This was also achieved by teaching approved materials with a critical lens, with an eye to representation and stereotypes in the literature. By engaging critically with texts and teaching deconstruction skills to students, the teachers are encouraging students to evaluate and engage with the curriculum.

Participants also described how language came into play in their anti-oppressive strategies. In this practice, teachers worked to make accessible the ways that language shapes and is shaped by oppression, as well as explicitly teaching about the
power of language. In this strategy, which all teachers described, they used explicitly anti-oppressive language to frame problems in the classroom, or discussion.

Corky, Sam, Phillip and Sophia gave instruction about ageism, sexism, racism, homophobia and learning disabilities and delineated different oppression using language that exposed power differentials. For example, Corky described giving instruction about how racism and sexism operated, and Sophia articulated with her students how some students have different needs based on their ability. They were also critical of terms such as ‘inappropriate language’ and ‘bullying’ that clouded power dynamics: "those words are out there so give them to the kids, let them know what it means. You know, it’s for their benefit as well as to be able to defend themselves and to be able to react positively when they themselves are being oppressed" (Phillip). Phillip indicated that this knowledge not only worked to empower students within relationships and in struggle, but also helped the students to make informed choices about their behavior.

The participants in this study also described using more generalized terms such as ‘respect’ to describe relationships, but in these cases, they worked to deconstruct the language and decide how they want to use certain words. In this example, teachers used class discussion to make meaning of abstract concepts that related to students’ relationships with each other. This was, again, a distinction between primary and intermediate, with the primary teachers relying on building knowledge around age-appropriate words (such as respect) with the intention that this will bridge to future learning about oppression.

The teachers also directly responded by correcting misinformation when it surfaced in the school. They identified that it was important to engage with issues when
they arise, especially when students voiced oppressive or stereotypical ideas. Phillip articulated the dangers of omitting direct instruction:

    Some people say ‘oh there isn’t time for this’...you end up bringing stuff into the classroom all the time, so I want to know what are other people doing? Are they just pretending these questions aren’t being asked? Or that, you know, stereotypical comments or hurtful language isn’t there? I mean it is there, so are you ignoring it? And what kind of message is that sending? I mean you have to be prepared to jump in there when it happens. Every time it happens.

The commitment of the participants to address issues of oppression in their classes when it occurred, or to use “teachable moments” to address social justice issues is a good inroad to building an understanding of the school climate, but still requires that teachers notice, or correctly analyse situations when and where they occur.

**Skills-based Anti-oppression: Teaching to the Cultural Test**

*Representing Cultural Dominance and Problematizing Ability: “The Culture of Power”*

Another way that the participants engaged with their students was by explicitly teaching skills which have social or emotional empowerment as their goal. Kumashiro (2002), Delpit (1988), and Cochran-Smith (1995) describe this as teaching the “culture of power” – by giving students the skills they need to succeed in the dominant culture.

Phillip and Corky, who eventually came to teach classes of students with learning exceptionalities, responded to their own students’ oppression by explicitly teaching social skills, life skills, and literacy. Phillip noted that:

    In order for them to be successful and to access, to the best of their abilities, society, they need those skills. They need to know how to shake somebody’s hand and introduce themselves, they need to know how to take no for an answer, they need to know how to solve problems with their boss or their spouse or whoever.
In this vein, the teachers indicated that situating the students in the curriculum was one way that they worked to create “culturally sensitive” skill acquisition aimed at cultural competency curricula. The participants indicated that focusing on curriculum that had relevance in students’ lives was one way of both connecting with their students, as well as implementing a program that addressed the needs of the classroom community. This also involved being empathetic about students’ struggles with the implications of this teaching. “it's a touchy thing because asking children to look inside themselves and say ‘I'm not meeting expectations because I've been a jerk to another human being’ and that's really hard” (Sophia). This speaks to her understanding that Social Responsibility learning needs to be explicitly taught. I believe that this understanding is linked, not to a deficit model of class or ability, but rather to an understanding of how institutionalized settings reprivilege hegemonic student knowledge, and these efforts are aimed at making transparent the criteria for success, but also in debriefing the means to the criteria. Sophia described how she accompanied students outside at recess at the beginning of the year in order to teach them how to play with each other in a respectful way that was inclusive of all students, in essence, to teach them to play in a nonviolent way. The teachers who chose this strategy spoke to the need to lay aside assumptions about student learning and expectations in order to work toward equality of experience.

This discourse was broadened to include all students, and recognition that this includes both appreciating students who already possessed social skills and encouraging modeling for and with other students.
**Challenging Cultural Dominance: Teaching Critical Thinking Skills**

All participants described teaching critical thinking skills in their classrooms, either using resources and then debriefing the process and learning with students, as described above in their use of language, or by engaging critically with students' beliefs and values. This section describes actions by the teachers aimed at transforming traditional classrooms into critical spaces for the interrogation of educational goals, as well as student and teacher participation within these goals. The participants indicated that modeling these kinds of thinking skills as teachers was also important in building a classroom community that valued critical thinking. For primary teachers, this was often done by building choices into the daily classroom routine, in class meetings, and in collaborative problem solving.

Teachers also identified engaging with students in discussion about the nature of knowledge and student participation in the construction of knowledge as well as their own schooling.

I’ll always ask them ‘well what’s the point of school?’ and just generate a discussion...and some of them actually say ‘it’s a socialization process.’ I’m like ‘how do you know that?’ (laughs) (Corky).

the whole point of school isn’t spoonfeeding a child into one way of thinking you know, and that’s the reason we have a hard time accepting other people and other beliefs, because we’re only spoonfed them certain ways, this is a mom and a dad and a kid and that’s a family...it’s like, no it’s not (Corky).

Intermediate teachers encouraged student autonomy through democratic class processes and consensus-building activities, including instruction on using Robert’s Rules of Order and class meetings. They identified that this was difficult work for the students, but essential in creating space for dissent and for power sharing.

I teach them how to run a meeting, that if adults are there they’re going to learn how to do it so they can say to an adult, ‘excuse me, we have a speaker’s list,
excuse me, are you making a motion? You know there’s a chairperson here’...you know, adults constantly interject with kids so I really felt that it was important for them to learn and have those skills (Sam).

Leading from this discussion, teachers also identified ways that they interacted with the community. Sam tells about participating with her class in civic politics, and holding an all-candidates meeting at her school that was researched, organized and chaired by the students in the class.

Discussion

In this section, I will first situate the three categories of strategies within the approaches outlined by Kumashiro (2002), and will follow this by situating the work that they have done within the framework of Young’s (1990) faces of oppression.

**Educating For the Other**

Teachers who advocated strategies that are described by Kumashiro’s (2002) *Educating For the Other* - building spaces that are safe for students who are differently or multiply located - generally described practice that addressed their understanding of their students as individuals with different learning styles or social locations. It was through working to ensure that “all students feel that they belong” and “representing all the students in my class” that teachers chose these strategies because of the omissions of traditional curriculum and Western culture. They worked to create space in their classrooms for a multiplicity of student expression and an awareness of how non-dominant or oppressed identities are silenced through exclusion and erasure. This discourse was frequently framed in terms of “open-ness” and inclusion, and difference was often framed as “representing diversity.” As Kumashiro (2002) notes, this approach
locates the issue of inclusion squarely on the Other, as they are in need of accommodation within the otherwise unproblematic system. While most of the participants’ responses bridged all four of Kumashiro’s anti-oppressive approaches, and were critical of the school system as a whole, those who relied most heavily on this approach were also those who were less critical of their teacher education programs, of the power structure of schools, and also were those who articulated a liberal pluralist approach in their political identity.

Sophia, Jayani and Corky used such inclusive teaching practices by initiating a method of teaching that allows for students with different learning styles or methods of expression to find space in the curriculum. Historical omissions and misrepresentation in curriculum were addressed by the actions of the teacher, who anticipates the needs of her or his class and endeavors to ensure some representation of all members.

As indicated above, participants who used *Educating For the Other* often situated themselves in the centre of the strategy. This is a teacher-centred discourse, for although it describes offering students place to discuss, to offer leadership, and to work towards respectful community, such strategies still came at the initiative or discretion of the teacher. They were, therefore, dependent on the teachers’ ability to notice the omission, and while it challenges the universalizing of experience, anti-oppression is a matter of more than simply “selecting and combining knowledges that are already available” (Ellsworth, 1994, p. 105). The teachers’ responses were also somewhat contradictory in that they advocated for the creation of an open accepting classroom climate. This climate is, however, constructed around Western concepts of openness, and this very lack of structure may be oppressive to some populations. Pappamihiel (2004) indicates that
teachers' demonstration of caring may not be interpreted appropriately by their students (p. 539).

At the same time that they frequently rejected traditionalist notions of achievement and conformity, they still focused on a "culture of power." There was little analysis of this contradiction, especially among teachers who worked in nontraditional classes. Within this strategy, the teachers must work to resist engaging in activities that can end up streaming students into non-academic programs, and reducing students' agency by paternalistically deciding what is appropriate for their developmental or intellectual abilities. Teachers who practice this approach must be careful to avoid undermining only the characteristics of schooling that challenge the students' self-concept and interaction with each other while leaving intact the systemic components of schooling, or by participating in assimilationist practices (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p.3). Michelle Fine indicates that streaming or tracking has the potential to reinforce privilege and oppression in that it side-steps practices that challenge institutionalized hierarchies (Fine, 1996, p. 59; Ellsworth, 1994, p. 102).

At the same time, the teachers made an effort to ensure that learning was centred in the students' lives, responded to their needs, and took account of their social location. This approach addressed academic and non-academic learning and attempted to change the way that learning is conceptualized, and worked to "produce not only factual or intellectual cultural knowledge and texts, [but] also produce knowledge in the realm of feeling, perceiving and being" (Henry, 1992, p. 399). Henry indicates that, when paired with strong academic instruction, this can empower students to identify and fight their own oppression. She indicates, in her critique of child-centred pedagogy (1996), that
current pedagogical practices are decided upon and implemented by policymakers, researchers and administrators and have a bias towards masculine, European values, and that these values do not necessarily incorporate the needs of marginalized students. As such, her argument supports teaching the “culture of power” because the curriculum alone will tend towards the reprivileging of students who are already members of the dominant group, and can exclude oppressed children (372).

Using strategies outlined by *Education For the Other*, although aimed at equalizing power amongst students, still often allowed for the possibility of unequal interactions, or worse, not challenging these constructs at all. For example, listening to opposite points of view from others is much more costly for the oppressed than the oppressor. For students with more power, there is little to compel them to change their minds, especially if they benefit from their perspective. In particularly violent or harassing situations, asking oppressed students to engage, potentially with their oppressor, in discussion and problem-solving, without a deeper understanding of how concepts like mediation or compromise typically reprivilege those who already have power, is dangerous and reproductive. The oppressor, in that potential situation is more likely to have the language or cultural skills to negotiate more successfully on their own behalves.

Also, having one book read about queer parenting, for example, may certainly go a long way in terms of description, but does not begin to change the lesson that othered students certainly learn from the sheer volume of books, resources and pictures that normalize hegemonic heterosexuality and gendered family roles. This was articulated by Phillip and Corky, who said that additive approaches are not effective at
changing school climates. While representation is an honorable aim, there is a possibility that a single book in a litany of representations of hegemonic identity may serve to emphasize difference through a tokenizing or isolating of difference, as well as to increasingly marginalize more radical or direct approaches of addressing oppression. Vaid (1995) outlines the dangers of mainstreaming when it happens in conjunction with, or instead of anti-oppressive movements, and sets up a binary between good / acceptable and bad / transformational methods of inclusion. She describes how assimilationist attempts to include queer culture in society end up reinforcing a “just like straight people” approach to difference that can preclude real social change (1995, p.181).

Also, in discussions that centre on the acceptance of the possibility of difference, there is little exploration of what constitutes difference and how it is constructed. This is perhaps due to the fact that these strategies do not often address particular oppressions, but instead focus on broadening the definition of oppressed social groups and recognizing some of the more generalized structural events that can be a barrier to participation, empowerment, and achievement. However, in this generalization, teachers risk broadening notions of inclusion to the point at which they ignore the specificities of oppression or its systemic nature.

The focus on collaborative work, and the devaluation of competition with students is one way that the teachers engaged with notions of “difference” in a way that did not risk paternalism and homogenizing. In working to undermine individualist discourses of achievement and its inclusion of the complex realities of students within their cultural, social and political location (Chalmers, 1996, p. 75), teachers confronted students
experience of positivistic learning frameworks and challenged their classes to develop an understanding that accounted for difference.

The efforts that the teachers identified in negotiating relationships among students can have effects that foster the recognition of multiple talents and strengths of students. This can work to help students recognize the strengths of their peers, and moves away from traditional deficit models of ability, as well as contributes to a sense of community in which mutual responsibility and a multiplicity of learning sources is valued (Henry, 1992, p. 400).

*Educating About the Other*

Corky, Jayani, Sophia, and Constance used the approach of *Educating About the Other* in the ways that they indicated using Social Responsibility curriculum to point out oppression. The teachers’ description of their work in this area explained how they created instructional or thematic ways of conceptualizing anti-oppression. This gave the students and teachers a language with which to integrate many of the same ideas from the first section into the curriculum. It also allows for teachers to address the students’ lives and to introduce a discourse of agency into their interactions with students by providing information and allowing students to make choices about their behavior. The premise of this practice is that students will, given information, decide against heterosexist, racist, sexist language choices. In the Social Responsibility curriculum, expectations are set up that evaluate students in terms of their peaceful problem solving, contributing to school and class community, valuing diversity and human rights and exercising democratic rights and responsibilities along a rubric of expectations. Teachers are encouraged to address these learning goals in their classroom, and many schools have identified Social
Responsibility as a school goal. This is helpful for teachers such as those in this study because they were identified by the teachers as a framework that helped them to justify their anti-oppressive work to parents and administration. In a sense, this curriculum enabled teachers to go beyond the suggested outcomes to extend anti-oppression into all aspects of their teaching. This was the most effective way that the teachers in the study named of integrating their anti-oppressive work.

However, Kelly (2005) indicates that Social Responsibility is a limited framework which implies that not everyone can or should meet the expectations. The description of the “fully meets expectations” category for Kindergarten to Grade 3, for instance, includes only one example of behavior that goes beyond compliance and rule following. The focus instead is on obedience, conformity constitutes yet another way in which students are continually being evaluated and assessed, and in which teachers are being held to an increasing number of decontextualized and tokenistic projects. She also describes how the onus rests on individual students to behave in a certain way, and ignores the context in which their behavior is framed. I agree that Social Responsibility has come to replace overt anti-oppressive instruction, and has the potential to hide the names of real oppression. The language of Social Responsibility obscures the way that power dynamics work. Similar to Kelly’s (2005) argument, I take issue with the fact that many of the descriptors of behavior that meets or exceeds expectations involve independent action, as opposed to collaborative action or continually increasing expectations. Again, teachers are being goaded into teaching independent mastery of skills rather than relational strategies of ongoing learning.
Given these criticisms, the teachers in this study identify using the Social Responsibility curriculum as a framework rather than as an evaluation tool. They have invented ways of addressing the goals that are more open-ended, creative and anti-oppressive, such as class meetings and collaboratively written class rules.

The other way that teachers engaged in Education About the Other was by integrating representative materials throughout the curriculum. I have categorized resource use into both sections, because I believe that the participants used resources to two different ends. With the primary teachers, the strategy of bringing and discussing representative literature, and in intermediate, the strategy of comparing and exploring contradictory texts, such as “Copper Sunrise” and “My name is Sepeetza” allow for the interrogation of colonialist representations. They also shift the focus of anti-oppression away from victimhood and into a discourse of agency and resistance (Dei, 2000, p. 27). Again, this concept assumes that even though appropriate or instructive texts are used, that the lessons or knowledge that students (or even teachers) will take away from the resources are definitive in increasing understanding and appreciation for diversity. Indeed, this positivist notion that knowledge will halt oppression is problematic (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 34) and risks essentializing the experiences of oppressed groups for their consumption by the dominant group.

Anti-oppressive educators who choose this strategy must also recognize and address their own location, especially as teachers and middle-class individuals, and be prepared to challenge their own privilege, or risk setting up false unity amongst and between social groups or hierarchizing oppression (Dei, 1994, Mohanty, 1990). The last limitation I wish to point out with this approach is the possibility of conflating difference
with sameness. In this case, when teachers show difference as another option alongside dominant representations of whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality and ability, the "difference is OK" discourse of liberal multiculturalism must choose between isolating and celebrating difference, or creating a bland continuum of human diversity.

**Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering**

Many of the ways that the teachers in this study participated in teaching that was *Critical of Privileging and Othering* were by de-centring themselves as the teacher, by inviting student leadership and undermining traditional authoritative teacher positioning. This is consistent with hooks’ descriptions of teaching that creates opportunities for the "shared construction of knowledge" (Shor, 1992). In being public with their own political beliefs and by not pretending to be objective, the teachers in this study are attempting to locate themselves in their work, in their classrooms, and in their relationships with students. According to Scanlon (1993), this is a strategy of modeling constructive disagreement and expression of opinion (p. 9). By placing students closer to the centre of their educational experience, the teachers work to minimize the structurally oppressive components of schooling, and address some of Freire’s concerns with traditional learning situations where students receive and teachers provide. While these strategies are useful in creating nontraditional relationships between teachers and students, and while the possibility of unlearning positional dichotomies is available, the change again comes at the initiative and discretion of the teachers. There is little possibility for students to question privilege in an overt way through the strategies demonstrated by the participants, and while including students in powerful positions, it does not eradicate power differentials. Oyler and Becker (1997) indicate that such
practices require that in “ideologies of togetherness,” we do not ignore power asymmetries (p. 457).

In using anti-oppressive language to describe interactions between students, and in instruction and discussion, teachers made clearer the ways that privilege and power operate. When the teachers in the study encouraged students to use terms such as “racism”, “sexism”, “ageism” and “homophobia” with which to describe their experiences, they are recognizing the binary of privilege and oppression and indicating the directionality of that power dynamic. For the primary teachers who chose to deconstruct language in a way that was age-appropriate and accessible to their students, they did so with a clear explanation of power differential, but stopped short of indicating that “not being respected” was more costly for some students than others.

In teaching critical thinking and collaborative problem solving skills, teachers offered opportunities for students to develop the analytical skills to notice and identify the conditions around classroom discord. By placing students in charge of class meetings and holding consensus-building or democratic activities, students have the opportunity to explore alternative solutions to interpersonal or structural difficulties. However, the teachers in the study did not clarify whether they found that power differentials among students were reproduced or undermined by such processes. It is conceivable that privileged students would simply participate with greater ease in such activities, thereby reinforcing privilege and oppression along binaries of race, gender, sexuality and ability. I concur with Gabel’s (2002) analysis that indicates merely offering inclusion does not break down systemic barriers to participation, and that interventions that address
disability or difference need to take into consideration the real, day-to-day manifestations of oppression (p.188).

Kumashiro (2002) indicates that critical thinking tools do not necessarily lead to transformative action. There is always the possibility that such strategies stop at notions of “empowerment” and may not problematize the relationship between the empowerer and those “needing” empowerment, thereby potentially undermining the agency of the students. When teachers engage in practice where they give students the tools to change, they must be prepared to remove themselves from the process in order to avoid replicating traditional power dynamics. Gabel (2002) complicates the notion of this approach by pointing out that oppressed populations must be consulted at the level of theorizing, or such practices can also reproduce ableist conceptions of participation. Two of the teachers in the study indicated that they did step back and allow students to come to conclusions or to negotiate solutions amongst each other. It is unclear from the interviews whether these solutions were always equitable, and whether intervention from the teacher would help to ameliorate oppression within these structures, or undermine the activity altogether. Strategies that rely solely on empathy run the risk of stopping at empathy and failing to move forward to action, or of identification fantasies that objectify or essentialize the Other (Roman, 1997, p. 272; Rosenberg, 1996, p. 83).

Education that Changes Students and Society

The work of the teachers in this study in their attempts to help students become agents of change were based largely around changing citational practices such as how teachers are identified and what roles they play in schools and in relationship with students, families and knowledge. By ceasing to reiterate the teacher as knower, the
students as learners, and by engaging with how this relationship is dangerous, oppressive and paternalistic, teachers are not only decentring themselves in the educational arena, but are creating space for student agency and student creation of new citational practices for themselves. By engaging with parents, particularly from marginalized communities, teachers began to break down traditional reprivileging of educated, culturally dominant groups. Henry (1992) indicates that teachers working to recognize and incorporate the context of community and family into their teaching can inform practice and increase understandings of marginalization, and can serve as a “counterpractice to marginalization” (p. 395).

This action on the part of teachers sought to identify and re-name dominant or subjugated positions. In the case of the teacher who invited parents to share their hopes and dreams for their children with her, and the teacher who asked students to reconsider categories of “weird” as related to behavioral controls and surveillance of gendered norms, they identified the ways that norms and historical relationships are enacted and enforced. This is consistent with Renold’s (2000) study on heterosexuality in elementary schools that indicates that heteronormativity is a strong force, and that there are severe challenges to non-hegemonic identities. In schools, using an understanding of whiteness and heterosexism, teachers can make clear the ways that standardized knowledge and educational practices are complicit with hegemonic discourses of citizenship and rights (Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh, 2004, p. 152).
A Broader Interpretation of Anti-oppressive Education for Elementary Schools

In describing political identity, the teachers in this study indicated that their beliefs were certainly grounded in anti-oppressive or activist roots. However, in exploring the strategies used to enact these beliefs, the teachers generally used inclusionist, diversity-focused approaches that do little to challenge the structural oppression that students, staff and parents face in the school system. As social groups, parents of colour, immigrant, non-English language speaking, aboriginal parents, parents of students with disabilities, or working class or underemployed parents are not included in the school system, nor are their concerns or needs addressed by the increasing accountability processes that schools are enacting. The teachers in this study indicate that they desired power sharing amongst stakeholder groups within the school system.

Despite my criticisms of the strategies employed by the participants in this study, I believe that these teachers’ work in their classrooms, given the many barriers they face provides a critical starting point from which these teachers can move to a place of more critical, anti-oppressive practices as their confidence and experience builds, and they receive increasing support and continuity in their work. This speaks fundamentally to how anti-oppressive teaching is an iterative process: learning how to embody anti-oppressive principles is not an inherent outcome of teacher education programs. The fact that these new teachers are critically reflecting on their practice suggests that movement is likely, especially if they experience relief from some of the barriers of practice that were identified.

The intent and action of the teachers in this study drastically shape how they go about doing anti-oppressive work, but also shapes their school community. For example,
simply inviting parents into schools is a generous, but not transformative act. Seeking out parents in their homes to help build an education that will address the needs of families, that locates and integrates children in the context of their historical and family experience is transformative indeed. In the classrooms of the primary teachers I spoke with for this research, they struggled to find a balance between presenting material that was age-appropriate and material that would change the world. In bringing books and resources to the school that create opportunities for discussion and for the creation of a new kind of dialogue between students and teachers, by undermining traditional dichotomies of teacher/learner, and challenging authoritative relationships amongst school communities, these teachers are not only recognizing the agency of their students, but also the opportunity for committed groups to work together to re-write the terms of their relationships.

**Marginalization, Powerlessness and Cultural Imperialism**

In corresponding Young’s (1990) *five faces of oppression* to Kumashiro’s (2002) approaches to anti-oppressive education, it becomes clear that many of the strategies enacted by the teachers in the study focus on issues of marginalization, powerlessness and cultural imperialism. What is appealing about Young’s analysis here is that it does not downplay or undermine the effects or workings of oppression even in liberal democratic climates. Young’s (1990) analysis of oppression indicates the importance of locating oppression firmly in the matrix of power dynamics, but also clearly points to the naming and locating of privilege within that same matrix. Young’s analysis of oppression also accounts for multiple identities, and recognizes that identities are not discrete, and therefore are overlapping. She describes oppression in terms of its effects
on oppressed communities, which resists a hierarchy of oppression, and also addresses the ways that individuals may belong to multiple social groups. Her description of oppression in terms of how it manifests as a product of privilege is particularly relevant in school systems because of how it attends to institutionalized knowledge. This is specifically useful in the increasingly diverse schools of Vancouver. It is imperative to understand oppression in terms of its manifestations including visible and invisible identities.

As indicated in Chapter 2, I will be focusing on three of Young’s (1990) concepts: *Marginalization, Powerlessness, and Cultural Imperialism.* I find this useful in terms of describing not only teachers’ actions, but also their identities. The teachers in this study indicate that they are well aware of their class and institutional privilege. Corky described her increasing desire to expand throughout the district as “increasing her sphere of influence”. Teachers are in a strange position of having cultural capital, class privilege and authoritative currency in Canadian society. They are also embedded in a complex system that devalues that very work, undermines autonomy and increasingly seeks to standardize and circumscribe teachers’ daily work.

In this vein, I would like first to describe teachers’ own locations using Young and Kumashiro’s theoretical frameworks. This table from Chapter 2 describes how marginalization, powerlessness and cultural imperialism affect the strategies that teachers use to effect change, and it also explains the strategies that they used with their students based on the needs they identify in their classroom. I do not mean to imply that teachers as a group are marginalized or powerless. Instead, I intend to use teachers’ descriptions of their experiences within schools to shape their practice.
Table 2: Matrix of Practice – Young’s faces of oppression as viewed through Kumashiro’s anti-oppressive approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Marginalization</th>
<th>Powerlessness</th>
<th>Cultural Imperialism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education For the Other</td>
<td>-addressing silences or absences in the curriculum</td>
<td>-teaching social skills and life skills</td>
<td>-checking own stereotypes in curriculum delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-teaching for a multitude of learning styles</td>
<td>-creating space for alternative identities and opinions</td>
<td>-recognizing dominant discourses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education About the Other</td>
<td>-addressing oppressive incidents (name calling, “bullying”)</td>
<td>-teaching about difference and inequality</td>
<td>-indicating bias in curriculum / resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-noticing and exposing inequality when present</td>
<td></td>
<td>-integrate othered texts into the curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education that is Critical</td>
<td>-deconstructing traditional resources</td>
<td>-curriculum that seeks equality of access and participation</td>
<td>-recognition of schools as sites of reproduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of Privileging and Othering</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education that Changes</td>
<td>-challenging notions of agency and citizenship within classrooms</td>
<td>-problem-posing or decentring pedagogies that problematize authority</td>
<td>-locating individuals in historical and institutional power dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students and Society</td>
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</table>

I argue that anti-oppressive teachers make choices about the curriculum and teaching strategies they choose to implement based on their perception of the needs of their students. I believe that the teachers in this study are clear and insightful about the power of students within the school system, as well as the power amongst students. First, however, I will look at the contextualized position of teachers. Based on the barriers they described in Chapter 4 and the agency they demonstrate in Chapter 5, I draw a relationship between their own sense of marginalization in the system as new teachers, their powerlessness as elementary school teachers, and their understanding of cultural imperialism as women, queer men, people of colour and Aboriginal people to use overtly anti-oppressive strategies.

I would also like to point out that there is an implicit hierarchy within Kumashiro’s approaches. *Education that Changes Students and Society* is presented as a more transformative method of effecting change over, for example, *Education For the
Other; however, given the broad age range of the participants' students, and the complexities of their own identities and the identities of their students, this relationship is not so straightforward. While some primary teachers used strategies that did alter citational processes and troubled notions of authority, power and privilege within the classroom, their use of such strategies was limited by the vocabularies, age and climate of their classrooms. The teachers who used more limited approaches to anti-oppressive education did so because of conscious choices about their audience, about choosing strategies that encouraged the most active participation by students and that would increasingly build on the skills of their students for future anti-oppressive endeavors.

In conceptualizing teachers' anti-oppressive strategies, several trends emerged. I am using a figure to indicate the relationship between teachers' curricular choices and their own location within the system.

Figure 1: Teachers' perception of their own power in schools and their choices of anti-oppressive practice
I do not mean to indicate that this relationship is causal, nor do I wish to present this as a definitive description of teachers’ choices. Clearly, there are exceptions to this rule. However, given the strategies that the participants chose to use in the context of their own experience in the system, there are some trends. The symbol “A” in the figure indicates teachers who are newer to the educational system and typically do not have a contract. Jayani, Constance and Sophia are teachers-on-call or teachers who identified feeling isolated or alienated in the system, partly due to the climates or administrative dynamic in their school, and partly due to a lack of connection to other anti-oppressive teachers, or union and professional supports. They identified themselves using terms like “lonely”, “powerless” and “fearful”. They were also teachers who, because of the younger age of their students, were subjected to culturally imperialist notions of children’s lack of agency.

Paternalistic notions of the susceptibility of young children to overtly anti-oppressive theory or the ability of children to engage or deal with notions of power, including concepts such as racism and especially homophobia creates a discourse of subjugation and invisibility. In avoiding such topics with children, teachers serve two oppressive purposes: effectively erasing discourses of power, especially the invisibility of whiteness or heternormativity, as well as silencing students of colour or queer students (Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh, 2004, p. 152). Children are rarely imbued by popular construction with characteristics of critical thinkers or agency. Similarly, teachers of very young children are described as “babysitters” and identified the perception of their work as “playing”, “singing songs and holding hands” (Phillip). These teachers disproportionately chose to use strategies such as “representing diversity in the
classroom” and “making everyone feel like they belong”. They also were primary teachers, and the perceived agency of their students in dominant discourses was low. The teachers in this group consistently challenged such descriptors of their students, but still identified the overarching paternalistic conception of children that shaped their work.

Teachers who are described by the symbol “B” described themselves as “activists” and “anti-oppressive.” Corky, Phillip and Sam were teachers who had teaching contracts, or who had been in a stable position for longer periods of time. They were well connected to union and professional organizations. They were also intermediate teachers, who have some degree of freedom from the denigration of their students’ agency. The generalization represented by Figure 1 became clear to me over the course of the interview in relation to two participants in particular.

Corky began the individual interview as a teacher-on-call. At the time of the individual interview, her strategies were generally located in the Education For the Other approach, and her articulation of her position as a teacher was largely framed by notions of powerlessness and marginalization. Between the individual interview and the group interview, Corky received a contract, placing her in a more stable, continuous position. She also moved into an intermediate classroom. Her classroom was also a district class for students with learning exceptionalities, and as such, she identified having more freedom to participate in nontraditional teaching practices, and articulated a decreased sense of surveillance from administration, parents and colleagues. Her strategies changed significantly and she began enacting Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering and extended into strategies that I would describe as Education that Changes Students and Society. This is another indication of how classroom and school setting are
primary factors in how teachers understand their ability to teach for social change. Corky moved from a position of no community, continuity or support into a position that included these factors. Due to the fact that she was in a district class, she articulated receiving these supports without the typical increase in surveillance and accountability. Corky’s situation is indeed exemplary in outlining how climate affects teacher practice.

Another example is Sophia, who described how a change in administration caused her sense of agency and autonomy to decrease significantly, as well as a loss of her school peer group whom she perceived as advocates and supportive colleagues increased her sense of powerlessness and marginalization. While Sophia had already established her use of anti-oppressive strategies in her classroom, she indicated a significantly higher discomfort with enacting these strategies.

In another fashion, this same grid could be applied to teachers’ strategies in relation to their perception of their students. This trend is described by the figure below:

*Figure 2: Teachers’ perception of the oppression of their students and their choices of anti-oppressive practice*

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liberal strategies</th>
<th>Transformative strategies</th>
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<tr>
<td>Marginalization,</td>
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<td>Powerlessness,</td>
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<td>Cultural Imperialism</td>
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<td>B</td>
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<td>A</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Marginalization,</td>
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<td>Powerlessness</td>
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In terms of strategy choice, the teachers’ perception of their students and the issues that they faced largely shaped the strategies they chose to employ in their classrooms. For example, if the teachers identified oppression as resulting from a lack of representation (marginalization) and ability to make choices on their own behalves (powerlessness) they chose to use strategies outlined by Kumashiro’s *Education For the Other*, and are represented by “A” in Figure 2. These participants were largely primary teachers, and those who exclusively used strategies that were more liberal in approach, as described by the “representing difference” group in the data. Jayani, Constance and Sophia’s description of their strategies suggested that the interventions required of teachers in order to create anti-oppressive school conditions were additions or complementary curriculum. They generally favored inclusion of diverse resources in their teaching and used strategies that allowed for a diversity of opinion or student identity.

The second group, represented by “B” on the figure, used the same strategies as group “A”, but Phillip, Corky and Sam also used more transformative approaches to anti-oppressive teaching. They relayed their understanding that the oppression students faced was related to marginalization, powerlessness, but also included components of cultural imperialism. These were intermediate teachers whose strategies aimed to effect systemic change, or who extended their strategies to problematize or challenge notions of community, learning and teacher-student relationships.

If we juxtapose these categories with each other, we find that intermediate teachers who are located in a more stable, supportive environment are also those who identify the issues facing students in schools that attend to marginalization, powerlessness
and cultural imperialism of their students, teach using strategies that reflect this analysis of their own safety and community, as well as their perception of the effect of this climate on students. We also find a group of primary teachers who are less experienced, in less stable and supportive environments, not generally well connected within their schools or districts, who perceive the issues facing their students as related to marginalization and powerlessness.

Having said this, I recognize the fact that the six teachers in this study are by no means a representative group of the general teaching population. I am nervous about conflating the curricular choices along primary / intermediate lines, despite the trends apparent in the data because the positionality of the teachers in the study and the climate in schools largely affect their perceptions of the issues that students face, as well as their own ability to make change within the system. In my own primary classroom, I have found that support from my colleagues, as well as a commitment to sociocultural teaching practices have meant that I have had the opportunity to not only use anti-oppressive pedagogy in my classroom, but to participate in discussions that broaden support and delivery of such practices throughout the school. In working in different schools during my early practice, however, it became clear that this is not typical.

The two major trends that emerged from the interviews that focused on anti-oppressive strategies were: teachers who taught in primary classrooms or were teachers-on-call experienced a higher level of marginalization and powerlessness in their schools, and fears about doing anti-oppressive teaching. They tended to choose strategies that represented diversity and worked toward inclusion in their classrooms. They approached anti-oppression from a liberal angle that did not generally challenge the institutionalized
nature of oppression, but rather worked to make the existing system more compatible or accessible for all students. Based on their responses in the “educational climate” section, this is partly due to the age of their students, and to their own marginalization within the system.

The second group of participants enacted a more transformative approach to anti-oppressive education and chose strategies that represented and included difference, but also worked to change the ways that students and teachers participated within the system. This is again, I believe, due to the age of their students, to their experience in the system, and to having found more supportive workplaces or organizations. Two of the three members of this last group were active in their union and had been teaching the longest. This group also included the two teachers who taught in non-traditional classrooms with students with exceptionalities, therefore did not participate in the mainstream system and were not required to attend to as many structural barriers as identified in Chapter 4.

In sum, it appears that a number of characteristics of classroom experience are factors in teachers’ ability to engage in anti-oppressive teaching. The greater number of these factors that teachers experienced, the more likely they were to approach anti-oppressive education in a transformational way. These factors are: teaching older students; having supportive networks of other teachers; years of experience; consistent teaching experience; teaching in non-traditional settings; and identifying that their students are affected by systemic marginalization, powerlessness and cultural imperialism.

In identifying the particularities of elementary education, it is imperative that we recognize that teachers practice within a complex web of factors that influence their
ability to teach anti-oppressively. From here, we can start to imagine a system that will better support teachers in their myriad practices.
CHAPTER 6 - Creating an Organized Response

In spite of myriad barriers, these teachers are resisting oppressive school conditions and advocating for change on a daily basis in their classrooms and schools. This section examines what conditions or changes would support them in their resistance, and aims to develop a school system that fosters anti-oppressive teaching and communities of teachers.

Generally, the participants responded in the context of the barriers they had experienced. However, in summarizing and working to recognize themes in the interviews, I avoided making assumptions about their desires. I used only the sections of the interviews in which I explicitly asked them to envision a better system or to tell me what they thought would make it easier for teachers to practice anti-oppressively in this chapter. For example, many teachers indicated that time at work, paperwork and bureaucratic aspects of the job were a barrier to anti-oppressive teaching. However, no teachers indicated that less paperwork or reporting would affect their anti-oppressive teaching abilities. I only documented the things they explicitly identified as helpful.

Teacher Education

Many of the suggestions that participants had for what would be better in supporting new teachers to do anti-oppressive work were focused around teacher education.

A major theme was a desire for more representative coursework in their preservice programs. They wished for a program that would address their own needs in working towards a greater understanding of the complexities of anti-oppressive teaching,
but also for a program that would portray more effectively and clearly the importance of
doing anti-oppressive teaching for those who did not feel a commitment to doing so. All
participants discussed a need for more coursework that was explicitly framed in anti-
oppressive terms, but also expressed a desire that anti-oppressive pedagogy be integrated
throughout the curriculum of teacher education courses. Some indicated that mandatory
coursework that would appeal to, or address the learning needs of, teachers unfamiliar
with anti-oppressive work was necessary. This included framing curriculum in anti-
oppressive terms rather than anti-racism, as Sam proposed, for example, because it might
be more readily embraced by more teachers, and also because it would give preservice
teachers an umbrella theme under which to learn and teach. Sam also indicated that this
approach would help make anti-oppressive education more inclusive of individuals who
have invisible or ambiguous personal identities. She felt that the University was
obligated to represent teaching in a political framework, and that one way to address this
was by making coursework on colonialism or class oppression mandatory. In this way,
Sam argued, teacher education programs could offer a more ‘in depth’ analysis of race,
class, gender and colonialism and could help to resist tokenist or trivialized attempts to
address oppression and change the generally uncritical approach that is taken to social
justice issues in teacher education. Many other participants responded in agreement that
the ‘one day’ approach to anti-oppression was problematic in terms of developing praxis
(Jayani). Constance describes the effect of this tokenistic or ‘one day’ approach to anti-
oppression within the teacher education program on her peers:
I don't think that a lot of people in my cohort really cared...they didn't really take that stuff to heart, about what was going on...[it was] interesting to learn about and like, that was it. It wasn't anything that really sparked a fire in them...it's sad but I really don't think that a lot of people really took that in and noted the seriousness of it.

This also reflected the belief that while the programming that was available in teacher education programs was helpful and interesting, there was a need for greater overlap of social justice issues with the curriculum courses. This was a major concern for the teachers in this study, who felt that the curriculum courses dealt exclusively with practice, lacking the theoretical or social justice component, and in the social justice components, implementation or practice was ignored. In response, the participants indicated that an improvement to teacher education would include an overlap of anti-oppressive theory and teaching practice. They struggled in particular with not knowing how to implement their anti-oppressive beliefs in the classroom. Sophia indicates that despite her appreciation for the anti-oppressive component of teacher education, the larger context of institutional liberalism requires a more direct, integrated approach:

It's wonderful that we got that much [direct instruction in teacher education] but it's not good enough, right? Especially when I think about how big the issue is, and how many people aren't on board we have a lot more work to do in the sense that not everyone's on the same page and we can't hope we're going to get everyone on the same page but the more training we can give to people who have their hearts in the right place the bigger chances we have.

The teachers in the study also indicated that they felt a great need for a more realistic understanding of the conditions of schools during their coursework. Their suggestions included the opportunity to visit schools, especially schools with issues that related to race and class in order to see how social justice issues affect classroom climates and teaching practice, or to have practicing new teachers visit teacher education classes to talk about the experience of being a new teacher. They also indicated that more practical
information about the day-to-day operating of schools and more direct instruction about teaching would increase the power of new teachers to make change.

Participants also recognized the need for programming to be far more responsive to individual teachers. They noted that a great deal of the coursework was unchallenging, rudimentary, or “baby stuff” (Phillip, Constance), and indicated that they felt that it did not account for the experiences and identities of the teachers. They desired a program that would not only account for the experience and interests of teachers, but that would also allow preservice teachers to situate themselves in the role of ‘teacher’ and to help teachers become more self-aware (Phillip). They also indicated that teacher education programs needed to be more supportive of individual teachers in their struggles with learning, as well as in their personal location. The indication from several participants was that they felt that there was not space for individual opinions, dissent, or non-conformity within the program. This was fleshed out by the participants by suggesting that teacher education needs to take individual teachers’ lives into account, and to work to support and reflect their multiple identities. This needs to be done, they argued, by minimizing the group mentality and reducing the implicit and explicit focus on conformity and silencing of personal expression. This could be achieved by rethinking the ways that teacher education programs’ evaluation and competition methods enforced rigid standards of behavior and representation. They also indicated that they hoped for programs that modeled the philosophy that they espoused, and allowed for greater student choice.

Following this vein of suggestions, the participants indicated that they were appreciative that their teacher education classes focused on collaborative group work, but
that this was continually undermined by competition amongst class members and evaluative methods that claimed to be open-ended but the participants perceived as reinforcing the views of the group. They experienced this pressure from instructors as well as peers. Constance indicates how the competitive nature of the program contributed to an underachieving climate that counteracted community building:

"I totally felt like I really had to dumb myself down... I did projects and I wouldn’t show anybody because I was... so terrified that everybody was going to be so pissed off at me and I was going to try to make them look bad or something but I didn’t really even think about them when I was making it, I was just like this is what I wanted to make, this is how I was going to express myself... I couldn’t express myself properly because I felt like maybe it’s taboo, or maybe if I go too overboard then I’m going to get sort of ostracized and it really did happen.

Similarly, Corky describes the way that her actions were policed in terms of her behavior and self-presentation, and how the evaluative process encouraged her to conform:

"Well I did find that what they did was they used the scare tactic, you know, and the best way to try to control people is leave them in fear right? (laughs) so you know, they did scare me to begin with, because you know... you’re going to get judged, they’re going to be writing a review, you know that you have to act a certain way, that you should be acting a certain way in order to get a good review.

The participants indicated, through statements such as these, that the programs they attended explicitly aimed to promote conformist teachers, and that their success in the program was based in part on this. This also means that the participants clearly understood what was expected of them, and especially in Constance’s comment, struggled with how they could maintain some integrity in their beliefs, but still escape negative feedback.

Sam responded to questions about improvements to teacher education by suggesting that teacher education programs involve a component that allows teachers to self-interrogate and to discover things about themselves and their family or cultural
history that is unrelated to the evaluative component of the course in order that preservice teachers can honestly engage with their own locations: “where you’re not censored, there’s no surveillance, it’s not a tool or a mechanism that’s used to weed you out” (Sam). This is supported by Schniedewind (2005) who argues that teachers who are unable to acknowledge their own racial identity will not recognize the similar needs of their students, nor understand the implications of how students from same and different racial locations need to be taught (p. 280). While a teacher education program that does not use evaluation strategies at all may not be possible, the teachers in this study indicate that they would prefer a more open-ended, collaborative or non-competitive assessment strategy that was consistent with the philosophy of their programs.

**Community of Support**

The changes that the participants envisioned around community and support within centered around two main themes: professional support for components of anti-oppressive teaching, and community or support for individuals as anti-oppressive educators. The first component was based around things that schools or districts could do to ease the transition into schools for new teachers, and were largely focused around resources or material supports. The second theme was based around notions of community in the sense of feeling integrated or supported by the teaching community, and building on their anti-oppressive beliefs to create better teaching practice.
Professional support

The theme of professional support recurred throughout the interviews. All participants described requiring some aspect of professional support for new teachers as focused around their anti-oppressive teaching practice. Many individuals identified needing a sanctioning of their practice from the school board and help in ensuring that they were doing the work “properly”. The participants indicated that district or school based resources were very important in making them feel safe in their anti-oppressive practices. They envisioned this support coming in the form of a consultant who could answer questions and offer feedback, (Sophia, Corky) or in some descriptions, a team of individuals or experts who could visit schools and advise about anti-oppressive practice in terms of creating school-wide change, or to support teachers who were resistant to changing their practice or implementing anti-oppressive teaching styles (Phillip).

The desire for professional development focused specifically around anti-oppressive teaching was commonly cited, but participants clarified that such training would need to be ongoing, mandatory and integrated into the school year and be supplemented by leadership positions within the school. The teachers articulated a concern that many teachers are resistant to change or curricular impositions from the district so such initiatives would need to be well supported and school-wide in order to be successful. They also felt that the two main groups of teachers who would benefit from this training are new teachers who need support developing practice and veteran teachers who may need support in responding positively to new teaching styles. Administrative support for new or nontraditional teaching practices was often cited as being paramount in establishing the feeling in teachers that they could branch out and extend their practice.
Within this district support, the teachers also indicated that they would appreciate clearer guidelines about the rights and responsibilities of teachers, including policy that articulates their options, implementation strategies and clear resource guides. They also wanted a greater diversity of accessible resources that addressed anti-oppression. The teachers in the study also indicated that they wished for more clarity around their professional autonomy, balanced with a sense of what accountability standards they needed to meet:

We need to be able to maintain some sense of control because it needs to be effective for the populations we are working with right, because something that works there isn’t going to work in East Vancouver, but at the same time, we want to have the accountability, so how do we mesh the two (Sophia)?

The participants envisioned this happening in very particular ways through the district. They wanted to see new curriculum written, district wide programs that addressed oppression, early intervention initiatives and the encouragement of school-wide anti-oppressive focuses. In order to have these efforts succeed, they identified increased funding to classrooms, more implementation time for teachers, and a greatly improved method of communication between the district and individual teachers or schools. They also identified that the hierarchical structures of schools were a barrier to new or innovative teaching and that in order to empower teachers to make changes in their practice, there needs to be a sharing of power amongst parents, teachers and administrators.

I think there needs to be more power sharing even in elementary school, talk about what would their community ideally look like, what we are working towards, what we are moving towards, even though individual teachers in the room might wish to make things more fair and address anti-oppression issues they’re still dealing with the structure that doesn’t lend towards it (Phillip).
**Personal Support**

The factors outlined in this section are generally focused around developing or evaluating the teachers' own practice, and the need for personal or individual support beyond resources or policy.

The participants indicated that they would appreciate the possibility to meet and talk with other educators who were doing the same work or who have identified the importance of doing anti-oppressive teaching in their classrooms. They described a community or group of educators who could have dialogue about their practice (Constance), share resources, offer and receive feedback on their ideas, and discuss practice. They indicated a desire to visit other teachers' classrooms and see what other people are doing, and to talk about how to best integrate anti-oppressive practices into their teaching.

The teachers in this study also identified that while they desired school climates that were supportive of anti-oppressive teaching, this community could also be outside of school settings where people could exchange ideas or develop new and interesting ways of teaching anti-oppressively, possibly in a “book club” format.

The participants also indicated that schools and districts should be working to increase personal support for new teachers, or facilitate increased opportunities for teachers to find support more readily. They articulated a need for increased support for collaborative teaching, and school-based contacts for new teachers, perhaps in a mentoring or supportive role. They also indicated that it would be helpful to have better outreach and communication between district and union anti-oppressive initiatives and new teachers. They also identified teachers-on-call as being particularly vulnerable and
that better support for new teachers and teachers-on-call to ensure a better initiation process with more information is necessary.

Discussion

Cochran-Smith (2003) supports the argument that teacher education needs to be a concerted effort towards anti-oppressive practice. She indicates that such programs, even if improved, may not be able to change schools themselves. However, the purpose of this research is not to discover ways to change the educational system, although many of its goals may in fact serve this purpose. The purpose of this research is to articulate the ways that schools, districts and teacher education programs can create better climates for anti-oppressive practice.

The data clearly shows that for new teachers, the experience of their teacher training was unsatisfactory in many regards. Two of the teachers in this study indicated that they had enjoyed their teacher education programs and had found them supportive, positive modeling and learning situations. However, these teachers were still critical of the practical training they had and their lack of preparedness for the real conditions in schools. They also indicated that the experience of being a new teacher was fraught with feelings of powerlessness and marginalization. As such, they indicated several changes they wished within the teacher education program in order to better prepare and support new teachers in their classrooms.

A number of the criticisms that were leveled at teacher education programs are similar to what Hinchman and Oyler (2000) attempt to create a teacher education program that allows preservice teachers the freedom to explore and develop their own
voices. In their study, they found that their practice ended up being "ironic" in that it attempted to open up space within the program for uncertainty and processing, but that this failed because teachers were struggling to find the "answers" to how to be a good teacher (p. 505). In addition to this irony, it was difficult for preservice teachers to accept uncertainty as a position when they are continually being evaluated on their performance as opposed to their process. Individual teachers may endeavor to undermine individualistic learning situations based on competition, but until the focus of such programs shifts to allow teachers to relish uncertainty and embrace the process of learning, they are asking students to suspend their realistic and adaptive knowledge about how such merit-based programs operate. At the same time, preservice teachers are aware that the roles they will soon be assuming are also evaluation-based positions in which they will be accountable to administrators, parents and colleagues.

As a result of this, the teachers who participated in this study described both ends of this continuum: they hoped for more practical, classroom-driven instruction, firmly grounded in lessons that look ahead to their teaching practice, yet they also wanted their teacher education programs to embody collaborative processes that encouraged a diversity of individual expression. Britzman (1990) indicates that there is a prevalent myth that learning to teach is based on experience, and that there is, can or should be an "authentic" moment in which knowledge is produced and one "becomes a teacher" (7). These positivistic notions of knowledge, power, authority and identity leave new teachers who do not feel that their learning is complete in an uncomfortable in-between place. A teacher education program that would give preservice teachers a variety of instructional strategies that incorporate social justice issues to choose from would address these needs.
Likewise, an elementary cohort for preservice teachers based on collaborative goals and social justice issues would be helpful. Cohorts currently exist in Vancouver that have aimed to address these issues, and are still discovering how to more effectively integrate social justice issues into instruction, and collaboration into academia (Farr-Darling, 2000).

Furthermore, the hopes of the participants that their districts would better support them in their daily anti-oppressive practice with resources, consultants, and “experts” mirrors their ongoing requests for community but also independence – a fine balance that includes both autonomy and support. Their requests for support began in teacher education but continued through to their teaching practice.

Also in response to criticisms of teacher education programs, the participants urged an integration of social justice issues throughout the curriculum instruction components of programming. They identified that many preservice teachers perceived social justice as outside of the real work of teaching, or that it was an optional or background course. Britzman (1991) indicates that the dangers of “compartmentalizing knowledge” serve to abstract and remove knowledge and learning from its context. This has implications for social justice work, as it does for teachers and students, for whom knowledge occurs outside of individual experiences and lives (p. 35). The fact that most of the participants stopped short of articulating strategies that effected systemic change points to the need for discussion in classes about invisible power dynamics or the potential to reproduce power dynamics inherent even in anti-oppressive classes. Cochran-Smith (1995) indicates that teacher education programs offer “implicit” lessons about anti-oppression: the fact that anti-oppressive education is not integrated into
curriculum and the ways that teacher educators talk about "other" all imply that there are rigid boundaries around the discussion and enactment of anti-oppressive pedagogies (p. 559). Nieto (2000) similarly argues for a teacher education that places social justice education at its' centre (182).

The other factor that was widely described as necessary in teacher education was the need for the program to be more responsive to individuals, in understanding that they come to the program with a great deal of experience from their lives – in educational institutions, with children, or in schools themselves. They also felt that there was very little support available for them as individuals who were grappling with personal, political and pedagogical dilemmas.

The participants were also clear in their hopes that teacher education programs would begin to account for individual experience and expertise. They noted that for teachers who come to the program with life experience or political analysis, there is little to be learned. This was mostly in response to the high level of group work required by their programs, and to the low level of political content in coursework. The implication of this is that a much more individualized approach to teacher education is required. Sam’s request for a teacher education program that would help preservice teachers to better self-identify and analyze their social location may address this. This is supported by Jenks, Lee and Kanpol (2001) who identify that a critical analysis of available philosophical frameworks can help teachers to locate themselves in the work, and that it is “through study and self-reflection when confronted with perspectives that challenge preconceived assumptions that significant changes in beliefs, attitudes and knowledge can occur” (p. 99). Teacher educators who decide to implement such an approach must
also be aware of the fact that this self-awareness can be potentially divisive. Barnoff’s (2001) work on feminist social service organizations supports the fact that the different social locations of participants will continue to complicate this goal:

groups of women who are differently located in social power relations often have different political and organizational agendas. This can create difficulties when these groups of women attempt to work together toward implementing anti-oppressive organizational change (p. 73).

While I would not classify teacher education as a feminist organizing tool, I believe many of the same factors come into play, and there needs to be practices in place that will guide newly self-aware preservice teachers into an understanding of their roles in the community so that self-analysis does not become an empty exercise where dominant discourses still prevail.

Constance articulates the individual aspect of this problem: “I just don’t want to be waking up and pretending that I’m somebody I’m not, because that’s what has to be done, and that’s the mold that you need to fit.” This sentiment is echoed by Britzman (1991), who articulates that the complexities of learning to be a teacher can mean “suppressing aspects of the self”, and “becoming someone you are not” (p. 4). This is also described by Sumara and Luce-Kapler (1996) as creating a “fictive identity” in order to negotiate the dissonance between their lives inside and outside of the classroom, and to resist the “homogenizing processes” of teacher training programs (p. 81).

Again, the participants indicated a need for both ends of the experiential spectrum in this regard: they wanted teacher education programs to recognize the diversity, depth of political analysis of their students, and to teach at a higher level with regards to social justice. However, they also wanted programs that would nurture along preservice teachers with little experience or exposure to social justice discourses. This latter request
was partly due to their explication of the need for peers who are doing similar work, which could translate into a better community of anti-oppressive educators.

Participants not only wanted more specific and direct instruction on how to do a better, more comprehensive job of doing anti-oppressive teaching, but also wanted others to participate alongside them in this work. This desire was grounded in the fact that they wished that more teachers were committed to anti-oppressive ideals and therefore creating a more supportive environment. The teachers’ articulation of this need centered on the understanding that in order for such widespread anti-oppressive instruction, teachers needed to have clear, explicit encouragement in addition to support in doing this work. Only one of the participants described a difficulty with accountability standards of the school system, and this one response was related to its inverse effect on autonomy; she indicated that the increasing accountability caused her to feel as though there was less opportunity for her to try out or do different things (Constance). All other teachers spoke of their conviction and desire for greater direction from the district on how to implement anti-oppression into their practice. They also anticipated a great deal of resistance from teachers for two reasons: teachers can be resistant to new, difficult approaches, and teachers are typically suspicious of top-down mandates from government or districts. The alternative solution would then be for districts to support initiatives that come from teachers or include extensive teacher input that addresses a wide variety of oppression.

My initial expectation at the beginning of this research project was that teachers would request or desire a community of critical educators. While there was some discussion about ways that individual teachers could meet or find one another to talk about or extend their anti-oppressive practices, there was not a high level of interest in
community-based organizing. I was initially surprised then, when 4 of the 6 participants continued to contact me to discuss their teaching practices, to ask about books, to tell me about their work, and to correspond with me in other ways based on the conversations we had had about anti-oppressive teaching. One of the participants and I have since become friends, based on our mutual activism. However, upon revisiting the interviews, I have realized that this was, in fact, the kind of community they had described as useful: a personal relationship or peer with whom to talk about practice and strategize.

It was also of interest to note that during the group interview, the discussion frequently turned to practical support: teachers brought issues they felt unresolved about to share with the group and request support; the participants problem-solved together and shared strategies and information about the information and programs they had found in the district; and commiserated with one another about their painful experiences. In this way, the group interview was what Korth (2002) calls “metaperformative” in that it pulls the performative into discourse in order to “examine the function and effectiveness of the form in light of the relations it constitutes” (p. 392) and offered the beginnings of a tentative community of social justice educators. Clearly, in the midst of a research project, in light of confidentiality and the power dynamics of the interview process, this was an inappropriate time to follow up with extending this community. However, it is my intention upon completion of this project to contact participants and offer a book club or opportunity to meet again and discuss practice.
Conclusion and Limitations

This study was aimed at articulating what the barriers are that prevent or impair new elementary school teachers from being able to enact anti-oppressive pedagogies in their schools. The teachers who participated in this study articulated a number of factors that affect their autonomy and make it risky or difficult to do anti-oppressive work, but identified that they found many ways to resist the climate in schools, and to create anti-oppressive space and curriculum.

The recruitment for this research was designed to seek participants who self-identified as anti-oppressive educators. They encompassed a wide range of political beliefs, teaching practices, social locations and teaching positions. Through semi-structured interviews, the participants identified the factors that were important to them.

The study was limited in its size and scope, with only six participants. It is intended to illustrate the possible experiences of new elementary school teachers in the Greater Vancouver area of British Columbia, Canada.

Another limitation of this study is that I chose not to ask questions of the participants that more clearly encouraged them to self-locate or identify. This meant that I did not have the opportunity to more explicitly investigate how the individual identities of the participants may have influenced their experiences in schools. I also made the purposeful decision to allow teachers to self-identify in terms of their suitability to the study. In this act, and by using undefined language such as “social justice” and “anti-oppressive,” it is possible that some potential participants may not have responded. While this strategy did lead to a group of respondents who enacted a variety of anti-oppressive practices and allowed for a deeper look at anti-oppressive pedagogy, the
participants disproportionately reflected teachers on the more experienced end of the
"new teacher" continuum, and teachers-on-call were underrepresented. This is due to the
systemic barriers detailed above; I have made the argument throughout this paper that
teachers-on-call are perhaps the most marginalized and isolated in the system, and having
greater representation from this group could have differently informed notions of
community and barriers.

Furthermore, in developing interview questions that addressed the lived
experiences of teachers, and asking them to critique the existing system in terms of their
current practice, I believe that I did not adequately provide participants with a forum in
which to imagine an alternative educational system. This is relevant, especially in light
of discussions about colonialism, where the parameters of Western institutional settings
can preclude discussions that think "outside" of existing structures.

This study addresses the gap in the literature that avoids addressing elementary
educators in their work for social change, and clarifies the difficult position that new
teachers face upon their transition from preservice to practicing teacher. Blending
together the ways that new teachers name and resist the institutionalized barriers to anti-
oppressive education paints a clearer picture of how we can work to decrease the
alienation and ideological loneliness of the position of "new teacher," and to increase the
likelihood of greater numbers of teachers choosing anti-oppressive pedagogies in their
classrooms. Using an anti-oppressive theoretical framework allowed the participants to
articulate their positions in schools while clearly situated in the power dynamics of
classrooms amongst colleagues, parents, administrators and students. It also created a
process that allowed the participants to imagine a better system in which there is
community, information and a strengthened teacher education process to support new elementary school teachers.

Key Findings

The teachers who participated in six individual interviews and the group interview described a school climate that is hostile, indifferent or difficult for new teachers interested in pursuing anti-oppressive pedagogy to navigate. This climate affected the participants in several ways, including increasing self-doubt about their philosophical and political pedagogy, alienation, loneliness and confusion. New teachers in Vancouver indicated feeling frustrated with the stagnant system, and the lack of anti-oppressive work happening in schools. Their position as elementary educators created additional constraints due to their struggles to enact age-appropriate practices that would not cause hardship on their teaching careers. They were very nervous about practicing anti-oppressively within liberal school climates and the possibility of backlash against them personally for their actions.

The responses that the participants identified in terms of making school climates more accepting and encouraging of anti-oppressive practice in elementary school were twofold: to develop teacher education programs that increased direct instruction and practical knowledge as well as a better integration of anti-oppressive practices throughout the curriculum that accounts for individual teachers’ experiences and to increase opportunities for new teachers to access information about the school system, and support for their practice and their teaching.
The Iterative Process of Practice

As the student population in Vancouver becomes increasingly diverse and human rights challenges and discussions become clearer in their applications, it behooves school districts to be more accountable for their schools’ social justice standpoints and approaches. It is through the experience and words of the teaching profession’s newest members that we can see the places where support and information for teachers breaks down. New teachers afford an opportunity for school districts to infuse the educational system with, and to offer leadership on, relevant, current pedagogical practices. To stifle or ignore the contributions of new teachers is to seriously undermine a possible source of systemic resistance to the traditional and institutionalized ways that schools continue to reproduce hegemonic power dynamics.

Furthermore, elementary schools are an optimal place to enact early interventionist approaches to social justice, begin conversations and start to restructure educationally stratified roles for teachers, parents and students. Reducing complex situational identities of teachers and students according to their age and experience is oppressive and silencing, and practicing teachers, teacher educators, and district managers need to reconsider their lackluster attempts to embrace, welcome and support new teachers into schools and districts.

This research identifies several themes and trends but also raises many questions. Further research needs to be conducted to investigate attrition and drop-out rates from teacher education programs and to determine whether hegemonic constructions of knowledge, instructional styles and lack of social justice discourses in teacher education are contributing to a teaching workforce that is uncritical of dominant educational discourses. More in-depth studies into elementary teacher education courses need to be
conducted with an eye to social justice issues, and with a mandate to determine the effectiveness of separating social justice from curriculum instruction. Research that tracks transition from teacher education programs through first year of teaching in conjunction with school boards would be helpful in understanding more specifically what supports are helpful and what districts can do to encourage and foster anti-oppressive teaching.

Additionally, local unions, teacher associations and district committees have been active in social justice issues; research that considers ways that new teachers access or fail to access this traditional source of support would be helpful to understand more clearly how and why teachers choose not to seek out existing sources of support or advocacy within their communities. This research has also indicated a need for study in the area of teachers' perceived professional autonomy in relation to increasing accountability and standardization within the educational system.

There are also implications for curriculum. Many teachers identified that having clear curriculum and resources would be a useful support. Research that would seek input from new teachers about a curriculum that moves beyond “Social Responsibility” in order to address systemic change would be particularly helpful, alongside a clearer understanding of how districts can better implement and support such curriculum. Finally, I believe we need studies that will seek to understand new teachers’ perception of their own agency and that will work to develop approaches to mobilize and distribute power more evenly throughout the teaching population. My own work at the union and district level has been immeasurably changed by this research project.
My hope is that this research will begin the conversation about these potential actions, and will make clear the need for a different approach to anti-oppressive education in elementary schools, and to sustain the desire to enact such practices amongst the profession’s newest members.

For teachers who are new to the profession, building a philosophy and politic of education that is anti-oppressive in the ever-changing climate of Vancouver schools is a daunting task. The teachers in this study, new teachers across the district and the country are engaged in the iterative process of determining how they can best embody anti-oppressive principles and practices in their everyday work. It is our task, then, to support them in any way we can, and to support their lifelong learning in the name of social justice.

1 For a discussion on the agency of youth and the implications of creating policy and practice that is accessible to youth see Roman (1996).
2 For the purposes of this study, I will use “social change” to refer to the desired effects of social justice teaching, building on the work of Greene (1998); Freire (2002) and Young (1990).
3 These constraints include a variety of theoretical and professional factors that will be described in greater detail in the literature review of this chapter.
4 Graveline (1994) and Chalmers (1996) articulate the backlash that they encountered from parents and administrators when they attempted to develop educational practices that challenged the status quo politics of otherwise “liberal” educational institutions. Bryson and deCastell (1997) document the ways transgressive teacher behavior is quickly policed by peers and society as illustrated in an article in Teacher magazine where teachers wrote to condemn anti-homophobia work that teachers were doing in schools on the basis on an ill-informed fear of AIDS (270).
5 Kumashiro (2000) describes anti-oppressive pedagogy as: “education that works against various forms of oppression” (p. 25). A discussion of the theoretical framework of anti-oppressive theory will be undertaken in more detail in Chapter 2.
6 Generally, pluralist approaches fall short of their mark, focusing on a liberal version of the issue, such as the way that anti-racism has been traded in for multiculturalism: “Canadian multiculturalism is a highly public rhetoric of approval around curriculum change, a less focused commitment to affirmative action or equity, some hysteria around political correctness and many strategies of containment” (Srivastava, 1997, p. 117)
8 In 2001, the BC Provincial legislature imposed Bill 18, the Skills Development and Labour Statutes Amendment Act that imposed essential service designation on teachers and education sector employees. This restricted or prohibited teachers’ right to strike (2001 Legislative Session: 2nd Session, 37th Parliament).
The Fraser Institute, a Vancouver right-wing 'think-tank' publishes a document each year ranking schools across the district according to their achievement on standardized FSA tests. Little or no attention is paid to the social factors that each school faces, nor the differences between the individual populations. “Putting education into the marketplace means making education appear more like a commodity so that parents are given access to a range of products from which they can select. In this framework, schools become more efficient in response to competition” (Sachs, 2001, p. 156).

School Growth plans have been mandated in British Columbia schools by the Ministry of Education. These growth plans must identify areas of focus for the year including instructional strategies and means of evaluation. These plans must be school-wide and must be agreed upon and signed by more parents than teachers, as well as having to be approved by administrators and management. This agenda clearly serves to increase “accountability” to parents and boards, while continuing to decrease individual teacher autonomy.


Between the years of 2001 and 2003 in British Columbia, “specialist” teachers were significantly reduced in schools as a result of funding cuts. Aboriginal Education teachers, English as a Second Language Teachers and Counsellors and Special Education teachers were cut by a combined 59.5% (Hawkey and Kuehn, 2004).

In this way, solutions that further stratify and standardize education increase the disparity in schools: “The construction of problems sometimes carries with it a more far-reaching perverse effect: it helps perpetuate or intensify the conditions that are defined as the problem, an outcome that typically stems from efforts to cope with a condition by changing the consciousness or the behavior of individuals while preserving the institutions that generate consciousness and behavior” (Edelman, 1988, p. 25).

The presentation of ‘choice’ is currently being held up as a solution to educational crises in funding and accountability. These ‘choices’ justify a need for independent schools that serve particular populations or identity groups. This discourse has taken the focus away from governmental accountability or the conditions of public neighborhood schools. By creating a false dichotomy and enunciating the deficits of public education without proposing solutions, parents are being given the choice of enrolling their children in schools that will represent only the ‘kind’ of teaching they want. Murray Edelman (1988) and Leslie Roman (1996) among others discuss moral panics as a way of articulating “problems” by way of their proposed solutions.

Teachers-on-call are itinerant or temporary teachers. A 1999 study found that Teachers-on-call are 80% female, and are on average 7 years younger than contract teachers. This same study found that teachers-on-call work an average of 73 days and earn an average $11,000 per year (Schaefer, 1999).

The moral panic surrounding “bullying” is another example of how specific, named oppression becomes subsumed by broader discussions of social trends. In this example, discussions of racism, sexism, homophobia and ableism are obscured by generalizing discourses that hide power differentials (Moy, 2001). In Vancouver, there is the use of the term “social responsibility” that is used to positively frame discussions about behavior that opposes racism, homophobia, sexism and bullying. Although there are components that address racism, child abuse, drug and alcohol use and homophobia, there are also more liberal constructs such as “empathy” built in, and schools wishing to address these issues are encouraged by district management to use the language of social responsibility in their growth plans.

I am referring here to the policy of multiculturalism that has been used as a term that overrides and erases description of racism, and more recently has been used to describe more broad “cultural” issues and even queer identities.

The authors use the terms liberal and critical as outlined in Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997). Liberal practice “values diversity for its own sake” while critical practitioners seek to change the systemic foundation of inequality and assume that inequality is systemic and institutionalized.

An example of this debate would be the Surrey School Board debate over allowing children’s books depicting same-sex parents into the schools. This moral panic has raged over several years and in and out of the provincial and supreme courts. The argument being made by the Board was that Kindergarten children are not capable of thinking about issues outside of dominant discourses of identity and traditional marriage.

A survey conducted by the Vancouver School Board in 2001 found that the staff of the VSB was 69.4% female, 79.3% white, and that only 2.8% identified as aboriginal, and 6.27% as a person with a disability (Jones, 2001, p. 4).
Phillip does not identify as 'queer', nor does he choose a signifying term to describe his sexuality. He requested that I use quotation marks around this term in order to indicate that he finds such labels problematic.

Chapter 5 includes a further discussion about the Social Responsibility curriculum.

Personal Planning is a provincial curriculum that addresses curricular subjects such as child abuse prevention and family life.

Some of the barriers that such parents face are systemic – irregular work hours, childcare issues or non-translated school materials, whereas others are related to cultural imperialism: the legacy of residential schools, historical alienation from schools or, for example, tokenistic processes aimed at “parent participation” whereby one or two parents are required to sign school growth plans and budgetary plans. Such participation schemes require that the parent be able to read and write in English, participate in extensive meetings during the day, and be literate in educational language.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A - Individual Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your personal politics?

2. What factors influenced your decision to become a teacher?

3. What attracted you to elementary education in particular?

4. How do you define social justice or anti-oppressive education?

5. What practices are currently being done at your school in response to social justice issues?

6. What are the characteristics of your teaching style that you define as anti-oppressive?

7. How did your teacher education program prepare you for working in the school system with regards to social justice education?

8. How would you describe or define your philosophy of teaching?

9. How has this philosophy helped you in your day-to-day teaching?

10. How have your social justice teaching practices been supported by parents, administration, and colleagues?

11. If they have not been supported, what responses have you experienced in the schools to your or other’s social justice teaching practices?

12. What barriers have you experienced in your attempts to use anti-oppressive practice at your school?

13. How have these responses (positive and negative) affected your teaching practice?

14. Have you adapted or changed your practice due to feedback or responses from parents, administration or colleagues?

15. Has your philosophy of teaching changed as a result of feedback or responses from parents, administration or colleagues?

16. What resources or supports do you think are necessary to better support teachers in their anti-oppressive / social justice teaching practices?

17. How would these resources or supports encourage teachers to choose anti-oppressive / social justice teaching practices?
Appendix B - Questions for Focus Group

1. What is missing in the teaching profession that makes it difficult to do anti-oppressive work?

2. Which of these conditions are specific to or different for new teachers?

3. Which of these conditions are specific to elementary education?

4. What discourses are available in schools to talk about anti-oppressive work?

5. How are these discourses helpful? What purposes do they serve? What is left out?

6. Why are liberal discourses appealing for teachers?

7. How would you define a community of teachers (that would be useful for supporting anti-oppressive practices)?

8. What could the board or union do to improve the working conditions of new teachers and teachers on call?

9. If participation in resource sharing and development is an issue, how can we reach out to or mobilize new teachers?