Teachers’ Perspectives on Sexual Health Education in Ontario Catholic Schools

By

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Abstract

In 2015, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2015) released the new Health and Physical Education Curriculum (HPE) for grades 1-8 and 9-12 including the updated Sexual Health Education (SHE) strand. Research studies have not explicitly examined how teachers’ personal religiosity affects their moral or ethical duties to present sexual health education. My central research question was: how are Ontario Catholic grades 3-8 teachers experiencing and negotiating the implementation of the new 2015 Sexual Health Education curriculum strand through a Catholic lens? Three Catholic teachers of grades three and four, six, and eight, in Southern Ontario were interviewed about their experiences implementing the new SHE curriculum. Five themes emerged from the interviews: the teachers felt sex education was necessary in Catholic schools; they did not understand the public controversy regarding the topics covered; they did not have any formal training and support varied from school to school; the teachers used their varying levels of religiosity and Catholic perspective to handle controversial topics; and the teachers felt that compassion for students was more important than enforcing Catholic doctrine. These findings suggest that Catholic school boards and the Ontario Ministry of Education should invest in positive publicity for SHE in religious contexts. Furthermore, Catholic school boards and educators would benefit from further support understanding how Catholicism impacts SHE and its delivery. Lastly, educational researchers should investigate educators’ religiosity as a spectrum rather than a binary.

Key Words: Catholic teacher experience, 2015 Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum, sexual health education, Fully Alive
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Context

In 2015, the Ontario Ministry of Education or OME (2015) released the new *Health and Physical Education Curriculum* (HPE) for Grades One to Eight and Nine to Twelve including the updated Sexual Health Education (SHE) strand. Prior to 2015, the HPE curriculum had not been updated since 1998. Between the 1998 and 2015 curricula, Dalton McGuinty’s provincial Liberal government tried to release revised curriculum in 2010. The 2010 curriculum was met with public backlash for its controversial topics, some of which included sexual orientation, gender identity, masturbation, and oral and anal intercourse (Brown, 2012; Oliver, van der Meulen, Larkin, Flicker, & Toronto Teen Survey Research Team 2013; Ophea, 2011; Valaitis, 2011).

The 2015 curriculum, released by subsequent Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne, includes many of the same topics that the 2010 curriculum aimed to incorporate. To keep up with comprehensive sex education as recommended by SIECCAN, the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (2008), the 2015 SHE strand incorporates topics such as safe technology use, self-concept including gender identity, masturbation, and delaying sexual activity with reference to vaginal, anal and oral sex. Wynne, like McGuinty, experienced backlash from some members of the public for the 2015 SHE curriculum including ‘too explicit’ material at too young an age. Some expressed anger about some explicit material such as teacher prompts like this one: “[e]xploring one’s body by touching or masturbating is something that many people do . . . It is common” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 175). Masturbation is explicitly against Catholic doctrine and thus, Catholics in particular may be troubled by this example. The curriculum document, however, explains that “examples and prompts do not set out requirements for student learning [as] they are optional not mandatory” (p. 20).
In Ontario, the publicly funded school system includes Catholic and secular ‘public’ schools. Both are required to teach the provincially mandated curriculum. Parents may choose to withdraw their children from aspects of the curriculum if the child is receiving satisfactory education at home or elsewhere (Education Act, 1990). Catholic curriculum is developed by the Institute for Catholic Education (ICE) and the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario (ACBO) but within the curriculum established by the Ontario Ministry of Education. ICE and ACBO are organizations that promote and support publicly-funded Catholic schools in Ontario. Teachers within Catholic school boards must complete a pre-service training course on incorporating the Catholic faith into the Ontario curriculum. Furthermore, they are expected to be practicing Catholics and must provide a pastoral reference when applying to Catholic school boards.

In Ontario, Catholic Kindergarten to Grade Eight schools teach sexual health education not within physical education classes, but as a part of their Family Life Education Curriculum. Family Life Education is a part of religious education: the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario writes that “Family Life Education, as it is represented in *Fully Alive*, is intended to pass on a distinctively Catholic view of human life, sexuality, marriage, and family” (Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, 2014a). Family Life Education curriculum was created with guidelines suggested by the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, now known as the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario (ABCO), which were published in 1978. With these guidelines Pearson Canada developed *Fully Alive* (1988 and 1992). *Fully Alive* began updates in 2016 and second edition textbooks were released for Kindergarten through Grade Eight throughout 2007-2014.

The ACBO website offers resources for families on *Fully Alive* featuring a letter for each ‘theme’, or unit, per grade outlining the curriculum and values taught. Theme three, Created
Sexual: Male and Female, in *Fully Alive* emphasizes that sexual intercourse should occur within marriage and natural family planning is preferred over physical or hormonal contraception. The most recent update seeks to include families who have separated or divorced parents. On the topic of sexual orientation and gender identity starting in Grade Six the family letter suggests to parents that it is common for young people to experience strong emotions for someone of the same sex and to normalize “crushes” (Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, 2014b, p. 15). These letters were created prior to the 2015 HPE curriculum and may not address all of the updates. Cardinal Collins the Archbishop of Toronto and President of ACBO released a statement promising accompanying resources “so that the new curriculum is implemented in a way that is consistent with our Catholic teachings and appropriate within the context of a Catholic classroom” (Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, 2015, p. 1). ICE created “A Parent’s Guide to Understanding Family Life Education” and curriculum charts by primary, junior, intermediate, and senior divisions available on their website (2015a). ICE also released a statement on September 1, 2015 detailing their plan to provide parent resources and teacher resources before the end of the 2015-2016 school year (Institute for Catholic Education, 2015b).

The public response to the 2015 HPE updates was rampant in the media and revolved around a few main complaints including concerns that students were learning how to have anal sex or masturbate, and that the curriculum promoted homosexuality; these concerns were often called “myths” in the media (Brown, 2015a; Peel Schools, 2015; Pickles, 2015). At one Toronto public elementary school in September 2015, 700 students were withdrawn from classes in protest of the new SHE curriculum, many of whom belong to the Muslim faith (Brown, 2015b). The Catholic public response called on organizations like ICE, ACBO, and the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association (OECTA) to send a strong message that Catholics would not
participate in the new curriculum, citing their disapproval for the un-Catholic education about contraception as well as gender identity and sexual orientation (McDermott, 2015). It is important to note that not all Catholics or religious groups fought the implementation of the new HPE – one Catholic district trustee defended the curriculum at a school board meeting that resulted in the need of police presence (Fatima, 2015).

Despite the backlash, many Ontarians feel that the 2015 Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum was a much-needed update from the 1998 curriculum. The developments in society around technology and sexual health have been so great that the amount of change has had a visible effect on the public and in the media. The role of Catholic schools to incorporate their faith into the new curriculum will now be the Catholic teachers’ duty.

1.1 Research Problem

Research about what should be taught in sexual health education, who should teach it, and how it should be taught has been represented in many research studies. Stakeholders including urban and rural students, parents, external health providers and religious groups have been sampled to gather this information (Byers, Sears, & Foster, 2013; Causarano, Pole, Flicker, & Toronto Teen Survey Team, 2010; Goldman, 2011; Meaney, Rye, Wood, & Solovieva, 2014). Teachers’ perspectives, however, have remained at the periphery of these studies. Furthermore, most studies that have examined teachers’ perspectives have focused on pre-service or in-service training and teachers’ comfort level teaching sexual health education (Cohen, Byers, & Sears, 2012; Eisenberg, Madsen, Oliphant, & Sieving, 2013; Martinez & Phillips, 2008; McKay & Barrett, 1999; Phillips & Martinez, 2010). Research studies have not explicitly examined how teachers’ personal religiosity affects their moral or ethical duties to present sexual health education.
Some Catholic parents have argued that the 2015 SHE strand is contrary to the Catholic doctrine. Catholic teachers are taking up the challenge of integrating the curriculum into the Catholic faith. Although school boards may plan to provide resources to assist teachers, teachers may also need to mediate personal moral and or religious convictions to teach sexual health according to provincially mandated curriculum. Teachers’ experiences teaching SHE including supports and limitations, a teachers’ ethical and moral beliefs, and teachers’ religious identity will contribute to the effective implementation of the SHE curriculum. The few sexual health education studies from teachers’ perspectives and the lack of research on how teacher’s religiosity influences teaching practice are perspectives that can contribute to effectively preparing Catholic SHE teachers.

While training can be designed and planned at the level of the Ministry of Education, school boards, or Catholic education groups, teachers’ perspectives on the training they receive will demonstrate a more accurate picture of the limitations and supports Catholic educators have when implementing the SHE curriculum.

Additionally, there are a lack of studies specifically focused on teachers’ experience implementing Fully Alive. Though Catholic board teachers initially demonstrated their Catholicity through a pastoral reference, looking at the variances from teacher to teacher in religiosity will help create a diverse image of what a ‘Catholic teacher’ looks like or does. Studying this from a teacher’s perspective will help close the gap between theory of curriculum and practice. How and what Catholic teachers decide to teach in addition to whether they reveal their own values in the classroom setting will be an issue with sexual health education in years to come, but also with other contentious topics that are highlighted in society and thus the classroom.
Teachers’ decisions to disclose or hide their personal beliefs presents an ethical dilemma when discussing sexual health topics such as gender identity or abstinence with students in Catholic elementary or middle schools. It has been found through the research of educational ethics that it is through more exposure and experience to ethical dilemmas that teachers can grow to be ethical practitioners (Campbell, 2003; Colnerud, 2006). Teachers must be exposed to and have the opportunity to think through their personal beliefs in regards to SHE curriculum in order to pre-emptively prepare for personal discomfort teaching SHE. Research in this area is relevant for current teachers as they continue to develop their own Catholic teaching identity but also how teachers of any faith negotiate personal values with societal values. Research in this area will help teachers develop as individuals, while also providing help to the field of education in how to respond to fluid and diverse opinions that enter their classrooms.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how junior and intermediate teachers (Grades Three to Eight) in publicly funded Ontario Catholic Schools are negotiating their own values and beliefs when teaching the updated SHE curriculum. To explore this topic, I interviewed a sample of these teachers about: how they implemented the curriculum; how they as unique individuals experienced the encounter between policy and personal morality; and any personal moral dilemmas they experienced while teaching SHE in a Catholic school system. By learning more about this new experience in Ontario, I hope to offer greater insight into how Catholic teacher identity emerges in the classroom and how to use this identity when teaching Catholic sexual health education. Furthermore, I hope my findings can help teachers to prepare themselves professionally for challenges with the SHE curriculum and more broadly how to bring controversial teaching material into the classroom.
1.3 Research Question

My central research question was: how are Ontario Catholic Grades Three to Eight teachers experiencing and negotiating the implementation of the new 2015 Sexual Health Education curriculum strand through the Catholic lens? My subquestions were:

• What are teachers’ experiences teaching the 2015 sexual health education through Fully Alive to Grades Three to Eight?

• What are the supports and limitations to Catholic teachers implementing the new Sexual Health Education strand?

• How do teachers conceptualize their Catholic identity in relation to the 2015 Ontario Sexual Health Education strand?

• How do teachers perceived morals reveal themselves through their teaching practices/strategies for sexual health education?

1.4 Background of the Researcher

As a cisgender Catholic feminist and LGBTQ ally, I often negotiate how my personal social justice beliefs compare with my religious beliefs and the doctrines of the Catholic Church. This personal internal tension has emerged in light of the new Health and Physical Education curriculum. I have developed a strong interest in learning how teachers negotiate their personal beliefs and required faith based teaching within the publicly funded Catholic school system. I think my position helps me in my research as I can begin to understand and have even personally experienced the tension teachers may experience teaching the new SHE.

In my undergraduate studies I studied gender and sexuality as well as the intersection between sex and religions. These courses highlighted how gender and sex are often studied as antitheses of each other. In the Catholic school system, teachers in Ontario are required to bring
the two together in an otherwise secular society. As a gender studies student, my exposure to the social study of sexual and gender identity and sexual and gender preference is greater than others. I needed to be sensitive and aware of the level of education or knowledge among my participants about these topics and how this affects my research.

Additionally, as a cisgender LGBTQ ally my views on social justice can sometimes conflict with the Catholic doctrine. Just as teachers must be conscious of how and if they represent their personal beliefs in the classroom, I explored my own positionality as it may influence my role as a researcher and interviewer. Gender equity and furthermore queer rights are relatively new movements. While I have been exposed to theory and history of these social rights movements many others including my participants may not have this background or knowledge.

It will be crucial that I recognize that each and every individual teacher will approach sexual health education not only from their position as a Catholic educator, but as a developing, growing and changing Catholic with different views or experiences of what Catholicity means to them in relation to sexual health. Furthermore, as a female without any children of my own it will be important to consider how teachers as parents will view the topic of educators teaching sexual health to students. These aspects of my personal identity and experience, both personal and academic, have driven me to complete this research in education for my MTRP.

1.5 Overview

This MTRP is divided into five chapters. Chapter One has included the context of the study, the purpose of the study, the research problem, the significance of the study, the main research question, and subsequent subquestions. It also included my background as a researcher and personal connection to this project as they have led me to choose this as my MTRP topic. In
Chapter Two I provide an overview of teachers’ experiences with SHE and their own religious identity. I will review the literature in the areas of implementing sexual health curriculum from teachers’ perspectives, the teacher’s religious identity in the classroom, and the moral and ethical position of teachers in the classroom. Next, in Chapter Three I elaborate on the research design. To respond to the research questions, I conducted a qualitative research study using purposive sampling to interview three Catholic teachers of Grades Three to Eight about their experience preparing for, and teaching the new sexual education curriculum in a Catholic setting. In Chapter Four I report my research findings and discuss their significance in light of the existing research literature. The data is organized by themes that emerged during the course of data analysis. In Chapter Five I identify the implications of the research findings for my own teacher identity and practice in publicly funded Catholic schools, and for the educational research community more broadly. I also articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings, and point to areas for future research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I review the literature in the areas of teachers’ perceptions of sexual health education, the religious identity in the classroom, and the ethical and moral role of teachers in their decision to disclose personal opinions or beliefs. More specifically, I review findings related to teachers’ comfort with teaching SHE and negotiating their personal beliefs alongside the expectations of Catholic education as an institution. I start by reviewing the literature in the area of teaching SHE and I consider supports and limitations to implementing sexual health education. Next, I review research on religious identities in education in order to exemplify how religious identities are defined and how they manifest in the classroom. Finally, I consider teachers’ moral and ethical duties to their students. I look at why teachers choose to disclose or not disclose their personal opinions in the classroom and strategies that teachers employ to ethically discuss controversial topics. To gather sources for this review, I used the following search terms: sexual health education (SHE), sexual reproductive health (SRH), ethics, morality, teachers’ perspectives, teachers’ experiences, middle school, junior grades, Health and Physical Education (HPE), fully alive, and family life.

2.1 Teacher Perspectives on Teaching Sexual Health Education

The literature reviewed in this section examines teachers’ perspectives in secular and Catholic schools, and they span from elementary to secondary schools to gain a greater picture of teachers’ interactions with SHE. This study takes on a unique perspective of focusing on internal religious ethical dilemmas and how teachers respond; and thus, teachers’ previously perceived limitations and supports may be confirmed or challenged with the new curriculum and within the publicly funded Catholic school system.
Surveying existing studies on teacher perspectives of sexual health education is important to gather an overview of how teachers in the past have responded to and implemented sexual health education. Research has primarily focused on other stakeholders’ perspectives of SHE rather than teacher perspectives. As this section makes clear, research has shown that teachers are often uncomfortable teaching controversial topics like gender identity and sexual pleasure. They tend to perceive training, subject knowledge, public response, and personal experience as contributing factors to supporting or hindering their implementation of SHE. Religious or non-religious beliefs can also be barriers to teaching in secular or Catholic schools respectively.

2.1.1 Common teacher perspectives on sexual health education. Sexual health topics are culturally sensitive, thus ‘appropriate’ becomes a concept that is laden with social context which can include variations based on culture, ethnicity, race, gender, and socio-economic status. Parents, students, teachers, administration, the federal government are stakeholders in sexual health education and all hold different perspectives on what is deemed appropriate material. It has been found that some teachers perceive sexual autonomy as synonymous with the legal age of consent (Martinez & Phillips, 2008). This may suggest that these teachers do not perceive youth under the age of 16 to be necessarily sexually active although the Ontario HPE curriculum suggests that students as young as 12 years of age require information about being sexually active (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Additionally, some middle school teachers reveal in interviews that they avoid teaching sexual pleasure as it pertains to puberty (Cohen et al., 2012). Teachers’ belief that students are sexually autonomous at 16 and the discomfort with discussing sexual pleasure in Grades Four to Six may indicate discordance between teachers and the curriculum.
‘Appropriate’ topics have also been further categorized as gendered topics. Gender-segregated sex education classes have generally been supported by high school teachers (Martinez & Phillips, 2008). The teacher’s gender, however, has not been found to affect willingness to teach traditionally gendered topics (Cohen et al., 2012). For example, a female teacher is comfortable teaching a male class or vice versa (it is important to note that gender in these cases is restricted to the traditional dichotomy of male and female and does not consider other genders). In addition to possible avoidance of teaching pleasure and sex (Cohen et al., 2012), teachers may also feel uncomfortable teaching topics regarding LGBTQ identities or may not consider culturally relevant pedagogy when teaching SHE (Martinez & Phillips, 2008).

2.1.2 Teachers’ perceptions of supports to implementing SHE. This section will outline what research has identified as supports for teachers to implement SHE. Research about teachers’ views of SHE have generally been in the area of identifying factors that affect their implementation of the curriculum. Cohen et al. (2012) found that the presence of SHE-specific training, greater perceived importance of SHE, greater self-perceived SHE-knowledge, and fewer years teaching indicated that teachers would be more willing to teach sex education. These findings identify that training and greater administrative support of curriculum implementation is necessary to increase teachers’ comfort with SHE. Additionally, a teachers’ greater self-perception of SHE-knowledge also correlates with less teaching experience. Cohen et al. (2012) found that the less experience a teacher has in teaching may suggest they are younger and thus may be more up to date with frequently changing ideas about sex education.

2.1.3 Teachers’ perceptions of limitations to implementing SHE. While training has been found to support teachers’ implementation of SHE, the research has also found a number of limitations including a lack of training, lack of time, conflicting personal beliefs, and fear of
parental backlash. While training was listed as a support to teaching SHE, studies have revealed that pre-service training on SHE in Ontario Bachelor of Education programs is not often mandatory (McKay, Byers, Voyer, Humphreys, & Markham, 2014); furthermore, if it is offered as optional courses, only a third of teachers opt to take these courses. Thus, more teachers may be unwilling or too uncomfortable to teach SHE.

A teachers’ comfort level can also be affected by their personal convictions about SHE. Cohen et al.’s (2012) study focused on elementary and middle school teachers and, though it did not address religion explicitly, it and other studies have found that personal beliefs are often a limitation to teachers’ implementation of SHE (Cohen et al., 2012; Martinez & Phillips, 2008; Oliver et al., 2013). The amount of time allotted to teach SHE among other curriculum requirements has also been perceived as a limitation (Eisenberg et al., 2013; Martinez & Phillips, 2008). Some teachers have felt, in relation to controversial topics and SHE in general, that the fear of public or parental response to what happens in the classroom prevents them from teaching SHE as they think it would be best taught (Barr, Goldfarb, Russell, Seabert, Wallen, & Wilson, 2014; Cohen et al., 2012; Martinez & Phillips, 2008).

Lastly, school policy has been perceived by teachers to be a limitation to teaching SHE (Eisenberg et al., 2013; Martinez & Phillips, 2008). School policy in these instances refers to topics that are included in SHE and how they may be taught. The limitations themselves are imposed on teachers by governing bodies such as school boards or internal school policies with the exception of personal beliefs (Eisenberg et al., 2013; Martinez & Phillips, 2008).

In sum, the literature highlights systemic barriers and identifies that teachers’ personal beliefs may be a limiting factor in their teaching of SHE. While some of the studies on teacher perception gather data on teachers’ religious identity (Cohen et al., 2012; Joseph & Efron, 1993;
Martinez & Phillips, 2008; Phillips & Martinez, 2010), they often do not to engage with religion in respect to the sexual education curriculum they are implementing. This is the focus of the next section.

2.2 Religious Identities and Sexual Health Education

While school boards can create guides, and provide training on how best to present the new curriculum through a Catholic lens, it is the teacher who will deliver the material through their own Catholic lens. It is important to examine how studies have defined the ‘Catholic teacher’ as well as how teachers have previously taught with their religious identity. Studies of Catholic teachers in K-12 education have previously relied on contrasting findings with their secular school teacher counterparts. This section will present an overview of existing research on religious identities in sex education as well as how religious identities sometimes act as barriers when implementing sex education.

2.2.1 Research on religious identities in sex education. When personal beliefs are discussed, particularly in moral or ethics studies, it has been found that a teacher’s personal beliefs manifest themselves in the classroom through content or teaching style (Campbell, 2003; Colnerud, 2006). In education studies, a participant’s religious affiliation is often collected, but teacher religiosity is not an in-depth studied area (Joseph & Efron, 1993). The study of variances in religiosity may reveal a more complex and thorough understanding of how religious identity and SHE intersect. SHE studies are often limited to whether they are teaching in Catholic schools or not (Cohen et al., 2012; Martinez & Phillips, 2008; Phillips & Martinez, 2010). When data on religious identity is gathered, it is only studied at a surface level. Faith and religion are more often studied in reference to students’ or parents’ faiths and how they receive this education.
The religious identities of teachers and students are commonly studied in the research on SHE; however, they are often restricted to a binary classification of religious or non-religious (Cohen et al., 2012; Joseph & Efron, 1993; Martinez & Phillips, 2008; Phillips & Martinez, 2010). This reduction does not allow for the conceptualization of how varying religiosities (e.g., feeling one is more or less spiritual or more or less orthodox) interact with topics such as SHE. This dualistic conceptualization has been criticized for reducing a complex aspect of one’s identity to a yes or no answer (Barrett, 2015), and furthermore, for assuming that religion and sex cannot coexist (Shipley, 2014). Characterizing religion as an assumed challenge or rejection of sexual health education clouds the opportunity for these two topics to coexist productively. In addition to the restrictive labelling of religious identity, in the classroom these identities are often viewed as barriers.

2.2.2 Teachers religious identity as a barrier to SHE delivery. Teachers’ religious identities have typically been perceived as a barrier in the classroom. Some teachers in public schools have been found to believe they must uphold the separation of state and religion (Joseph and Efron, 1993; Shipley, 2014; White 2009), while other teachers in Catholic or Christian schools feel they must censor their personal beliefs so as not to contradict school mandates (Cohen et al., 2012; Martinez & Phillips, 2008). In general, these studies have found that teachers experience discomfort when personal beliefs are brought up in the classroom due to a fear of propagandizing.

Censorship is the largest barrier associated with religious identity in the classroom. Martinez and Phillips (2008) interviewed a teacher who considers himself a “moral
conservative” and that “there are many parts of the Ontario curriculum regarding teens being sexually active, masturbation, homosexuality that according to the curriculum [he has] to teach as healthy and normal and these are not things [he believes] in” (p. 152). In this case, this teacher’s religious identity was censored by the Ontario Curriculum. Martinez’s and Phillips’s interviews also revealed a strategy of another teacher who, when “he’s gay” was used as an insult, explained that one’s orientation is private and should not be discussed at all (p. 152).

In other studies, religious teachers have expressed the belief that it is important to take a stance on controversial and religious issues. How this stance reveals itself in a classroom varies; some teachers feel it is necessary to preface their personal opinion as not factual information (Barrett, 2015; Joseph & Efron, 1993) while others do not feel it is possible to be true to themselves without teaching their personal moral beliefs (Joseph & Efron, 1993). Some Catholic teachers find that controversial issues such as sexual orientation, sexual identity, and abortion are uncomfortable topics because of their personal religious beliefs (Martinez & Phillips, 2008; Phillips & Martinez, 2010). As in the section introduction, the limitation for many of these studies is that religiosity is generally defined or participants are not asked to define their own faith identities.

2.3 The Ethical and Moral Role of Teachers

Teachers are held to a higher moral standard and have often been expected to teach students not only in academics, but in moral development. The concept of morals is socially constructed and thus teachers may be expected to teach not their own morals, but publicly accepted notions of morality. In looking at how ethics and morals are acted upon in the classroom, we can begin to understand how teachers may act if their personal morals do not align with the Catholic presentation of sexual health education. It has been argued that a teacher’s
individual beliefs cannot be separated from their teaching practice (Colnerud, 2006; Osguthorpe, 2008; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011); thus, it is important to learn what conflicts exist and how teachers negotiate them in their practice.

Research into the ethics of teachers has not focused specifically on religious identity; however, it has circumstantially appeared in the interviews of many teachers. As touched on in earlier sections, teachers find themselves in ethically precarious positions as they act in place of the parent; however, they are also held accountable for their actions in the public eye. Research has shown how teachers negotiate their identity in the classroom, but also why they choose to act in the way they do. In ethics and moral research, teachers have either believed that their personal beliefs align with the common societal opinion or that they do not. From there, teachers have acted upon their own morals as important to the teaching of their students, have hidden their personal beliefs in the hopes of acting as impartial and fair teachers, or have shared their opinion while emphasizing it is personal and not fact. The literature below examines teachers’ stances on disclosing their personal opinions and how teachers negotiate conflicts that arise because of their personal beliefs.

2.3.1 Teacher’s stances on disclosure of personal opinions in the classroom. There are two schools of thought in the literature regarding teachers’ decisions to disclose or not disclose their personal beliefs in the classroom. Some teachers believe that they can and should share their own opinions in the classroom (Barrett, 2015; Campbell, 2003; Scarfo & Zuker, 2011). In this school of thought, some teachers believe that their opinion can be presented in a way that exposes students to different points of view without unjustly persuading students to agree without critically thinking about the topic at hand. For example, the teacher featured in Barrett’s
(2015) case study felt that wearing a white poppy on Remembrance Day allowed students the opportunity to discuss alternative points of view instead of instigating the conversation herself.

It is important to note that it is debated among ethics researchers whether teachers can present themselves as fully objective or neutral (Hess & McAvoy, 2009). Similarly, the second school of thought offers that teachers cannot or should not share their opinion because it crosses an ethical line and risks propagandizing vulnerable young students (Campbell, 2003; Hess & McAvoy, 2009; Scarfo & Zuker, 2011). Furthermore, among the teachers who feel they should not disclose personal opinions, many are wary of crossing the line between parenting and educating students (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011) and, furthermore, of backlash from parents who feel they have crossed that line (Martinez & Phillips, 2008). A study by Hess and McAvoy (2009) revealed that none of the participant teachers reported a desire to influence students’ political views when questioned about their choice to disclose or not to disclose personal opinions in the classroom. Contrarily, Joseph & Efron (1993) interviewed a teacher who felt it was their duty to correct their perceived student’s moral failings. It is possible that the strength of teachers’ personal beliefs may purposefully or inadvertently influence students in their moral development.

Relevant to this study are the ways teachers feel about their right to disclose their opinions within a Catholic school where teachers are expected to uphold the values of the Catholic faith. Teacher interviews have revealed that some teachers uphold those values in the classroom but do not necessarily agree with or live those values outside the classroom (Campbell, 2003). Some teachers may also choose to teach material or values that do not align with Catholicism because they feel they are too important to the students’ education to exclude (Martinez & Phillips, 2008).
2.3.2 Strategies used to negotiate conflict because of personal beliefs. Research on the ethics and morals of teachers reveals that teachers do indeed experience internal conflict within the classroom. Colnerud (2006) summarizes this challenge: “one of the problems is finding a balance between loyalty to the institutional assignment and loyalty to the needs of the pupil” (p. 380). For those teachers who believe they can share their opinions in the classroom, discussion is one strategy of ethical teaching (Campbell, 2003; Hess & McAvoy, 2009). Discussion within the class about various points of view on one topic is believed by some teachers to eliminate the danger of inculcating students with one opinion as the ‘right’ opinion. Some teachers report explicitly saying ‘this is my opinion’ before sharing their own views with the intention that students recognize it is acceptable to disagree with the teacher (Hess & McAvoy, 2009; Joseph & Efron, 1993). Lastly, for teachers who do not want to disclose their opinions, they report adopting a neutral stance when discussing all sides of a topic; however, the ability of any teacher to take a neutral stance is debated (Hess & McAvoy, 2009). Few strategies of those unwilling to disclose their opinion are discussed. I suspect this is because these strategies are not explicit tools to use in a classroom, but rather a mental and internal exercise of neutrality.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed research on teachers’ perspectives on SHE, research on religious identities in education and in the classroom, and teachers’ ethical decisions to disclose or hide their personal opinions. This review elucidates the limited attention that has been paid to teachers’ experience implementing SHE. It also raises questions about why the religious identities of teachers are reduced to the simple binary or ‘religious or non-religious’ and points to the need for further research in the areas of what strategies teachers use when their personal beliefs do not align with institutional values.
In light of this, the purpose of my research is to learn how Catholic teachers’ varying religiosity affects their ability to implement SHE and, furthermore, what strategies help them balance expectation of the curriculum with their personal beliefs. With this information, the educational community can learn how best to train teachers to deliver SHE with personal comfort and the utmost sensitivity to cultural and institutional expectations. Through semi-structured interviews with Ontario Catholic middle school teachers, I explored how the 2015 sexual health strand of the HPE curriculum is delivered. Moreover, I learned about how the curriculum is affected by the individual opinions and experiences of the participant Catholic teachers. With this study, then, I hope to contribute to the body of knowledge on a teacher’s religious identity in the classroom. This in turn may help with understanding the diversity of our students as Ontario is growing in cultural diversity not only in race and ethnicity, but also religion and creed.
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I describe the research methodology. I begin by reviewing the approach and procedures of data collection. Then I will review the sampling criteria, procedures, and recruitment. I explain the data analysis methods and the ethical considerations pertinent to my study. I will examine the methodological limitations as well as highlight the strengths of the methodology. Finally, I will summarize the key methodological decisions and the rationale for these decisions given the purpose and questions of my study.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This is a qualitative research study that consists of a literature review and semi-structured interviews with educators about their experience in implementing the Ontario 2015 sexual health strand of the Health and Physical Education curriculum. Qualitative research can take on many forms and so its definition can be detailed to different extents. Lichtman (2011) explains that the accessible writing style, the transparent approach, and the author’s clarity in explaining the meaningfulness and value of the research are elements necessary to qualitative research. Cresswell’s (2013) definition places emphasis on the process: “[q]ualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, [and collect] data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study” (p. 44). Additionally, they note that the researcher role is crucial in qualitative research as they collect data using open-ended questions, they allow participants to guide the research rather than seeking to prove a specific hypothesis as is common in quantitative research, and the researcher positions their self in relation to the study (Cresswell, 2013). Qualitative research is valuable in that it empowers individuals by giving them the opportunity to share their voice. The style allows for data to emerge about individuals’ or
groups’ opinions about how or why a problem exists. Furthermore, it can capture interactions among people and can enable the analysis of “gender differences, race, economic status, and individual differences” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 48). Overall, qualitative research seeks to identify themes and create theories (Lichtman, 2011) for further study rather than prove or test a theory or hypothesis.

Qualitative research is suitable for studying teachers’ experiences of implementing the 2015 SHE because it has the ability to capture how or why teachers implement curriculum differently. Teachers’ self-perceptions of their Catholic religiosity is not easily quantifiable as individuals perceive themselves in relation to others and the contexts in which they are situated. My role is also significant in the study as I am a Catholic teacher candidate. Mehra (2001) writes that “the researcher, in the naturalistic paradigm of inquiry, is not just an observer; he or she both disturbs the research setting and is also disturbed by it” (p. 69). The experiences of my participants are within contexts that I understand, and may be similar to or differ from my own experiences. By interweaving my own identity within the study my intentions become more transparent, and the ways in which my experiences shape my interpretation of the data can enrich the study.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

I used a semi-structured interview protocol with teachers to collect data. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to invite participants to share certain information. Semi-structured interviews “are guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, but neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time” (Merriam, 1988, p. 74). Patton explains “We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe ... We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions” (Patton, 2002 as cited in
Merriam, 1988, p. 72). The strengths of semi-structured interviews are that they allow the researchers to elicit specific data on certain issues; however, they also allow the participant to share information that the researcher had never considered valuable before. In this way, the semi-structured interview values participant voices. Morehouse (2012) describes that, in a semi-structured interview, the participant is considered a “co-researcher”, and the inquiry is “emergent” which allows for flexibility and an in-depth understanding of the issues at hand (p. 80).

Semi-structured interviews were suitable for my study because teachers were able to explain their perception of their religiosity. Religiosity is not easily quantifiable through surveys and thus it was appropriate to allow the participants to explain their identity in their own words. Through this process, themes emerged that speak to what characteristics teachers perceived as more religious than others. Additionally, through open-ended questions and a qualitative structure, teachers were both the participant and the contributor who guided data collection. They spoke to issues or experiences that I as a researcher did not consider. The teachers through the interview process reflected on their own teaching experience and learnt about themselves and their practice. As a Catholic teacher candidate it was suitable that my participants were “co-researchers” as I feel that the relationship between a researcher and participant implies a power dynamic. In this study teachers whom I interviewed were the source of knowledge and thus their voices were equally if not more valuable in the study.

My protocol was guided by my research question “how are Grades Three-Eight Catholic Educators experiencing the implementation of the 2015 sexual health education through a Catholic lens?” My protocol (Appendix B) was organized in four sections beginning with the participant’s background information. Next, the educator was asked about their experience
teaching the new curriculum, Fully Alive. The third section asked them about the supports and limitations they experienced with regards to the new curriculum and their own Catholic identity. Lastly I asked them about their strategies to integrate Catholic education and sexual health education. Before the interview ended, participants were allowed the opportunity to add or discuss any other issues or details that they felt were important to the research.

3.3 Participants

In this section I review my sampling criteria, detail my sampling procedures and introduce participants.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria. The following criteria were applied to teacher participants:

- Teachers have taught sexual health education in any of Grades Three to Eight in a Catholic school board
- Teacher participants have worked in different Catholic school boards in the Greater Toronto Area
- Teachers have experienced teaching both the 1998 sexual health education strand and the 2015 sexual health education strand

The nature of this study required a small and selective sample to gain in-depth insight (Morehouse, 2012) into teachers’ experiences. To gather the information required to address my research question and purpose I interviewed participants who had taught both the old and new HPE curriculum in a Catholic school. I interviewed teachers of Grades Three to Eight because it is at these ages that the curriculum addresses puberty, sexual orientation, and sexual attraction. To have a geographic focus I interviewed teachers in Southern Ontario, but varied the school boards in which they taught to expand the range of data that may have informed their experiences.
3.3.2 Sampling procedures/recruitment. As this is a qualitative research study, the sample was smaller in size (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison 2000). I conducted purposive sampling and convenience sampling. In qualitative research, purposive sampling is an ideal method as this means the sample is selected on purpose in a systematic way (Morehouse, 2012). This type of sampling “seeks to gain a picture of a larger group by examining a smaller group” (Morehouse, 2012, p. 74). A purposive sample indicates that the teachers who will participate in my study will be selected because they can inform my understanding of the research problem specifically based on their experiences (Cresswell, 2013). Convenient sampling is often used when participants are easily accessible (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). As a pre-service teacher who had completed practica in the Southern Ontario and as a former Catholic student I used my pre-existing network of teachers to locate participants for this study. Furthermore, I sought teachers from different Catholic school boards to maximize the variation of my sampling. In maximum variation sampling “the researcher maximizes the differences at the beginning of the study, [which] increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 157). In addition to maximum variation used the snowball strategy. Snowballing is a technique that maximizes variation in participants by ask a participant to recommend another potential participant similar or different to themselves (Morehouse, 2012). Through my current teacher network, I identified schools or teachers who were information-rich candidates who could recommend other participants from other school boards or grade levels.

3.3.3 Participant biographies. For this research project, I interviewed three Catholic teachers from three different Catholic school boards in Ontario, Canada. All three teachers met the sampling criteria as Catholic teachers of Grades Three-Eight and had the opportunity to teach both the 1998 Health and Physical Education Curriculum as well as the 2015 revised curriculum.
Sophie has been teaching for eight years and currently teaches Grade Six. She has always taught in Catholic schools and growing up she attended a Catholic school in Ontario. Her young child attends a Catholic school as well. She identifies as Catholic, describes herself as “semi-religious”, and attends mass a few times a year. Growing up in a Catholic school in Ontario she was educated using the Fully Alive program and remembers learning how the body works and that she was told not to have sex until marriage. Sophie is the youngest participant in this study.

Dawn is a veteran Catholic teacher and has been teaching for 27 years. During this research project she taught a blended Grades Three and Four class. She has always taught in Catholic schools. Dawn was raised Catholic and has raised her teenage children Catholic as well. She attends mass weekly and feels that her faith is in everything that she does. She grew up in a strict family who followed the Catholic rules. She attended Catholic schools growing up in the 1970s and 1980s and she was not taught any sexual health education. Dawn attributes some of her comfort with sexual health education with being a mother and teaching her own children informal sexual health education.

Bernard is a Catholic teacher who has been teaching for 21 years in Catholic schools. During this research project he taught Grade Eight. Bernard was raised Catholic, attends mass every Sunday, and considers himself a strong Catholic. Growing up in the Catholic school system he did not recall sex education apart from a video about pregnancy in early elementary school. He associates the need for sexual health education with the outbreak of aids and believes, that although he would rather not need to teach students about SHE at a young age, it is necessary for their safety.
3.4 Data Analysis

To analyze my data, I transcribed my interviews, code transcripts individually, create categories of data, found themes within the categories, and synthesized themes among interviews. I transcribed the interviews as accurately as possible as with qualitative analysis information can be gathered in the word choice or actions of participants (Morehouse, 2012). I coded each transcript individually by identifying units of meaning. Morehouse (2012) describes units of meaning as “a complete idea or concept or interaction” (p. 86). Through the transcribing and analysis process I gathered a thorough familiarity with the data, and in my position as interviewer my interaction with the participant informed my data analysis. A code was assigned to each unit of meaning which was then compared across all participants through themes. Through this process, relationships or patterns emerged (Merriam, 1988). I coded and analyzed this data in relation to my research purpose and questions. Additionally, I took note of reoccurring themes, data outside the scope of my research, while recognizing the null data and its significance.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

The function of qualitative research situates the researcher in respect to the study and is by nature interpretive. It should be acknowledged that qualitative research for this reason carries some risk. The primary instrument for data collection in qualitative research is the researcher. Merriam and Tisdell explain that “the human instrument has shortcomings and biases that can have an impact on the study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 29). To negotiate biases, they recommend the researcher explain their biases in their research.

Ethical researchers seek to maintain the freedom to research and protect individuals who participate (Lichtman, 2011). With qualitative research, it can sometimes be difficult to identify
the risks for participants (Lichtman, 2011). For this study, I considered the ethics of consent, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and data storage. To establish consent participants were provided with a summary of the purpose of the study, the ethical implications, and the expectations of participants within a consent form that grants permission for them to be interviewed and audio recorded (Appendix A). Participants were made aware that before, during, or after, the interview they had the right to withdraw from the study making any of their data theretofore gathered inadmissible. To maintain confidentiality means that “information provided by participants should in no way reveal their identity” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 61). To protect my participants’ identities, audio recordings were destroyed after they are transcribed using pseudonyms and any identifying data such as schools’ names were removed. Additionally, data from the interviews recorded on a cell phone that was locked and password protected at all times. Electronic data was password protected on a secured computer and was not hosted by a data sharing platform such as Google Drive or One Drive. Lastly, hard copy documents such as consent forms were kept on my person during transport and were locked in a secure cabinet.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Qualitative research seeks to explore multiple layers of individual’s or groups’ experiences. There are, however, some limitations to this research method. Often findings cannot be generalized and sample sizes are smaller than in many quantitative studies (Kincheloe, 2012). Qualitative researchers generalize how and why there may be a problem, but because they are generalizations of complex issues “they do not lend themselves to easy solutions or quick fixes” (Eisenhart, 2006, p. 702). The nature of qualitative research is to explore participants’ subjectivities and identify emerging patterns of experience. Therefore, discussion of findings can
be varied as the researcher’s own position in relation to the study affects their interpretation of data (Kincheloe, 2012). Additionally, the researchers’ self-reflexive role may create a bias in the analysis of data. Finally, in the eyes of the public qualitative research is many things and there are many approaches that share the same characteristics, but this ambiguity can threaten qualitative methodology’s image of legitimacy (Lichtman, 2011).

Despite these limitations, qualitative research gives value to different voices and perspectives and thus makes meaning of multiple knowledges (Cresswell, 2013). Qualitative methods allow researchers to devise studies that examine the relationships within their study in ways that quantitative research cannot. Additionally, qualitative research is not dependent on the researcher’s own hypothesis or preconceptions of the issue at hand (Tuettemann, 2003), thus this makes room for participants to reveal data or contribute to findings that were not expected. Lastly, qualitative research seeks knowledge in the context in which it evolves; “Human behaviour is shaped in context and events cannot be understood adequately if isolated from their contexts” (Sherman & Webb, 2005). In valuing and considering the context in which the research is performed, qualitative methods highlight the rich data that can be found in the relationship between participant and environment.

In this study, the qualitative interview process served to give voice to Catholic teachers to identify their own levels of religiosity. My biases and approach as a Catholic teacher candidate have shaped this process, however through semi-structured interviews themes may emerged that were individual to the participants. The public’s investment in this issue is relevant and timely, and therefore the size and scope of this research may not reflect the all existing points of views belonging to Catholic teachers however it generalizes the issue and makes recommendations toward further inquiry.
3.7 Conclusion: Brief Overview and Preview

In this chapter I explained the research methodology. I began with a discussion of my research approach and procedure, while highlighting the meaning and significance of qualitative research. I then described the instruments of data collection, and identified that semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data. I spoke to the benefits of semi-structured interviews and their fit for this study. Next I identified the participants of the study, listed the criteria applied to all interviewees, and included brief biographies for each participant. I described the recruitment procedures and located my methods in convenience and snowball sampling. I proceeded to describe how I analyzed the data, looking at participants first individually before identifying common themes across all the data. Ethical issues including consent, confidentiality, data storage, and risks of participation were outlined and I listed the ways these potential issues were addressed. Lastly, I explored the limitations of qualitative research methodologies including the narrow scope and research bias while identifying its strengths such as valuing the voices of the participants. In the next chapter, I report on the findings of the research.
Chapter Four: Research Findings

4.0 Chapter Introduction

In Chapter One, I provided context for my research question: how are Catholic teachers implementing the new 2015 Sexual Health Education (SHE) curriculum strand? The public and media coverage of this controversial curriculum suggested that insight into its implementation would be beneficial for Ontario education. Furthermore, my own identity as a feminist Catholic educator fueled my interest of understanding how SHE is implemented in Catholic schools. The literature review revealed that SHE research does not often engage with the teacher’s perspective of teaching sex education. Additionally, the research reduces teachers’ religious identity to a binary criterion and fails to investigate how varied religiosity impacts teachers’ implementation of SHE. To answer my research question and contribute to literature about SHE I designed semi-structured interviews for Catholic teachers. The following chapter highlights and explores prominent themes that emerged from an analysis of the data collected through semi-structured interviews with elementary school teachers from three different Catholic school boards in Southern Ontario. All three teacher participants had the experience of teaching the updated sexual health content of the 2015 Ontario Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum. All three interviews were conducted the summer and early fall following the release and implementation of the curriculum. The identified themes were organized into the following sections:

1) The Necessity of Sex Education in Elementary Catholic Schools

2) Perspectives on Updated Curriculum and Public ‘Controversy’

3) Limitations to Implementation
4) Supports and Strategies for Implementation

5) The Ethical Consideration of Compassion

Each theme is divided into sub-themes that further illustrate the teachers’ experiences in the classroom. I will discuss each theme and participants’ responses will be considered in light of the extant literature. The interviews revealed the participants’ comfort with SHE in the Catholic context and highlighted the need to explore religiosity as a scale rather than a binary.

4.1 The Necessity of Sexual Health Education in Catholic Elementary Schools

All three teacher participants felt that it is necessary to have sex education in Catholic elementary schools because of the realities of today’s society. Each teacher acknowledged the dangers for children at any age who do not receive a proper sex education. Firstly, the teachers felt that their students come from homes where families do not talk about sex and many come from families of divorce or separation. They feel that as Catholic teachers they need to show and expose children to models of healthy marriages. Both Dawn and Bernard recognized that their Grade Six and Grade Eight students were at the age where they were exploring romantic relationships and that this information was pertinent to their growth. Lastly, Bernard highlighted that sexuality is part of the Catholic faith and that the Catholic textbook, Fully Alive, states that we are created as sexual beings and it is part of God’s plan. This section will explore why the teachers believed that sex education is necessary in Catholic elementary schools.

4.1.1 Perceived lack of parental involvement. The participants of this study believed that Catholic elementary schools need sex education because they perceive that parents and families are unwilling to educate their children themselves. They all perceived the Catholic family as mostly unwilling or hesitant to talk about sexual health at home. Dawn stated that, over her twenty-seven years of teaching, there was a growing trend that parents were less involved in
their kids’ education. She shared that after she sends a letter notifying parents that the class will begin their sexual health unit she imagines parents whispering “Good thank God!” Dawn’s dramatization of a relieved parent demonstrated that she felt that not only is it important for her as a teacher to talk about sexual health education, but she believed that parents also prefer for schools to teach their children rather than have conversations about sex at home.

Sophie perceived that some parents were willing to talk about sex but others were not. She shared one experience of calling a parent to notify them that their son was curious about a topic that was beyond his grade’s curriculum, and that she felt it would be best discussed at home. She laughed while recalling the parent’s reaction, whereupon they giggled “like her Grade Six students” at the mention of sex. Overall, then, Dawn and Sophie both held the perception that Catholic parents are relieved that schools are teaching their children about sex.

Bernard called the avoidance of talking about sex at home a “stigma”. His perception of lack of parental involvement stemmed from his experience of students coming from divorced or separated parents. He talked about how he felt it was his “responsibility” to provide this information,

[Sex is] taken from a perspective of self-respect and being in a loving caring relationship. Realizing there’s a connection between a sexual act and a loving and caring relationship. So, I mean, I think it’s a really good message especially in today’s world where 80% of my students are coming from homes that, you know, . . . there’s a split or whatever, there’s a lot of family drama going on that they need to hear what a healthy relationship should look like.
He believed that Catholic schools in particular need a Catholic sex education because of the reality that in today’s society many parents are getting divorces. He suggested that students need to see and learn about a Catholic perspective on healthy relationships and sex.

The media has overwhelmingly created a portrait of conservative and religious parents as loud and unruly with their concerns about school sex education curriculum (Brown, 2015a; Peel Schools, 2015; Pickles, 2015). While reports of the SHE protests such as the Toronto elementary school that was vandalised with the words “shame on you” depicts angry and rebellious parents (CBC News, 2015) the participants’ experiences portrayed underwhelming parents who preferred schools and teachers to handle potentially uncomfortable topics like sex education. The participants viewed parents’ disengagement and the lack of Catholic role models of marriage as key reasons to teach SHE in Catholic schools.

4.1.2 Students are sexual beings. Society has a desire to believe that children are not sexual beings; however, two of the participants noted that their students were going through puberty and were experiencing sexual attraction. The third participant taught Grades Three and Four and did not have students who were necessarily experiencing puberty, and thus did not comment on the students having outward sexual attraction. Sophie and Bernard, the Grades Six and Eight teachers in my study, noted that their students were at the age where they were exploring romantic relationships. These teachers felt that these experiences warrant SHE in Catholic elementary schools. The teachers interviewed by Martinez and Phillips (2008) regarding the 1999 Ontario Health and Physical felt that students under the age of consent could not choose to be sexual. Sophie and Bernard, contrarily recognized that the age of consent does not dictate when youth begin to engage in sexual activity. Some of Sophie’s students have reportedly started dating and the Grade Six curriculum fittingly focuses on sexual attraction. Bernard teaches
students that sex is something special to save until marriage with the hope “that somewhere down the line [respect for your partner] will resonate for [students] and that they won’t give into peer pressure”. He takes the stance that students are in situations where they need to make decisions about whether to be sexually active and he believes that sharing the Catholic viewpoint will help them refrain from making uninformed decisions. This strategy aligns with Phillips and Martinez’ (2010) finding that Catholic teachers tend to emphasize communication between partners because they are unable to fully discuss contraception. Bernard, however, does discuss contraception since it is included in the curriculum, which I will discuss at the end of the chapter. Overall, then, both Sophie and Bernard recognized that students are in the position to make decisions about their sexual health as early as Grade Six and thus view it is necessary to provide SHE.

4.1.3 Human sexuality is part of the Catholic faith. As Dawn, Sophie, and Bernard believe that sexual health is part of their students’ lives, so does the Catholic faith. The existence of the Fully Alive curriculum demonstrates that the Catholic Church recognize the need to educate youth about sexuality, relationships, and the family unit. Bernard’s teaching philosophy is consistent with Shipley’s (2014) critique of the belief that religion and sex are opposing ideas, specifically in that Bernard identified that human sexuality is part of Catholicism. In contrast to the common belief that the Catholic faith does not tolerate any discussion of sex at all, he explained how the Catholic curriculum “[talks] about the person as a body/spirit . . . and they try to meld the two so that the sexual act is not just on its own”. He also reportedly told his students that “God created us to be sexual beings. I mean clearly if God did not want us to be sexual he would not create us the way he did, hello!”. Bernard’s direct and humorous approach blended our reality with the Catholic faith. He goes on to tell students that being able to create life is the
greatest gift and responsibility from God. For him as Catholic teacher, he cannot teach SHE without talking about God. Similarly, Dawn recalls explaining parents’ intercourse using her Catholic perspective; “it’s a special love and bond between parents”. Dawn knows that her students need to be aware that sexuality is part of the Catholic faith and that it led to their own creation.

All three teacher participants believed that sexual health education is necessary due to the reality of society today, and they perceived some parents as unwilling to discuss sex at home. Reflective of the updated curriculum, they all believed that access to technology and misinformation is a vital reason to have sex education in schools. The Grade Six and Eight teachers, Sophie and Bernard, acknowledged that students are going through puberty and starting romantic relationships. Lastly, Bernard made an explicit connection between Catholicism and humans as sexual beings. For these reasons, the participants agreed that sexual health education is necessary in Catholic elementary schools. The teachers all saw value in the updated curriculum and throughout the interview offered their opinions as to why it provoked public controversy.

4.2 Perspectives on Updated Curriculum and Public ‘Controversy’

Throughout the interviews I found that all three teachers perceived that other Catholic educators and they themselves were supportive of the new SHE curriculum. The participants felt that the updates were minimal and appropriate, and furthermore that the controversy was due to misinformed parents and a vocal group of protestors. When questioned about the updates to the curriculum, all three teachers recounted flipping through the old curriculum and the addendum they were sent in the late spring of 2016 and remembered thinking there is not that much that has changed. Each candidate had little to nothing to say about the curriculum itself and instead
directed their focus to their teaching practices or other reasons that the curriculum was in the media. Two reasons emerged from the participants as to why there was such a controversy over sex education: firstly, the perception that parents were misinformed about what the curriculum entailed; and secondly, that it was not in their own grade’s curriculum but in others that there might be ‘unsavoury’ and ‘difficult’ topics. This section will outline the teachers’ views on the controversy and the emergence of these two beliefs.

4.2.1 Misinformation about the curriculum. When the participants established that, there was not an issue with the curriculum itself, Dawn looked to the parents’ lack of awareness as the source of controversy. She specified about the Grade Three/Four curriculum that “it really really is not anything earth shattering. Maybe parents didn’t realize what was in the curriculum before?” In the Grade Four curriculum students are educated on puberty and its emotional and social impact as well as hygiene and care (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Dawn also described the parents in opposition of the SHE curriculum as “a really small vocal group ‘cause there was all this upheaval and don’t know why cause its really not a big deal”. Dawn’s opinion addresses the media’s coverage of parents withdrawing students from schools (Brown, 2015b), and argues that it is not representative of all parents’ perspectives of the new sex education curriculum. Dawn not only points towards a “small vocal group” of parents, but also searches for sources of controversy in other grade level curricula.

4.2.2 Curricula of other grade levels. To further the idea that misinformation was the source of controversy, all three teachers when unable to find fault in the curricula themselves pointed toward other grade level curricula as potential sources of the uproar. One of the controversial updates was the discussion of gender identity, same sex marriage, and in general LGBTQ issues. Dawn, the Grades Three and Four teacher, when asked about same-sex parenting
hesitated and cited that this topic is covered in older grades. Her hesitation may reflect that she simply has never been forced to consider LGBTQ topics and that she may feel uncomfortable teaching these topics like many other teachers (Martinez & Phillips, 2008) and, furthermore, that she sees LGBTQ issues as a potential for controversy in other grades.

Sophie, like Dawn, deferred major changes to other grades and brought up same-sex relationships. When asked if there were many changes to the curriculum she responded, “maybe in the Grade seven/eight curriculum? . . . you know I don’t think there’s a lot of change . . . there might be a couple more stories regarding um lesbian and gay relationships.” Interestingly, she approached the LGBTQ issues with more comfort when acknowledging their presence, and without demonstrating any hesitation toward this subject matter. Overall, then, both Dawn and Sophie identified sexual orientation and same-sex marriage as additions to the curriculum, but differed in their comfort with the topic. Dawn does not explicitly teach these topics in the grade three and four curricula and can easily deflect toward older grades as sources of information. Sophie approached this topic in straight forward manner that suggests her comfort, yet also points towards grades seven and eight as potential hot spots for controversy.

Bernard, conversely, views his task of teaching LGBTQ issues to his students as simple because they are old enough to understand these relationships. He explains that by Grade eight the students have already seen and know about same-sex marriage so it is unsurprising to them. He later expanded his answer: “in Grade three or four when you’re introducing those concepts I’d be interested to hear what some of those teachers’ responses to that or what the Fully Alive book suggests how they respond”. Like the other two teachers, Bernard looks to other grades as having the controversial topics, but he believes that it is harder to teach younger children.
The teachers’ experiences with the curriculum suggest that the topics covered are appropriate and their unanimous response to search for controversy elsewhere may suggest that there is not a controversy. Their responses proffered that student age, parents, and LGBTQ topics were potential sources of controversy, but in their own experiences across various grade levels they found no grievances with the curriculum topics. However, while they had no issues with the curriculum itself, they did experience limitations to its implementation.

4.3 Limitations to Implementation

Each teacher experienced limitations that impacted the delivery of the new curriculum in the classroom. In this section I will explore these limitations through the themes of in-service training, pre-service training and availability of resources, curriculum restrictions through grade levels, parent reactions and communication, and lastly, the perception of other teachers’ limitations. Many of these limitations deal with the logistics of implementing new curriculum and adhering to their guidelines and are in line with existing literature and are also not particular to the Catholic school context. However, the section on perceptions of other teachers’ limitations addresses the ways in which Catholic identity and levels of religiosity may impede an educator’s implementation of SHE.

4.3.1 Training, resources and the curriculum. All three teachers expressed that they were not provided with any in-service training and did not recall pre-service training related to the delivery of sexual health education. Dawn explains that when she was given the binder resource for SHE she thought “just read it and go to it”. Sophie explained that her principal was aware of some uneasiness among the teachers when the new curriculum was announced, and they arranged for a speaker from the school board to explain its details. The lack of pre-service training may be excused by the timeframe during which the participants attended their teacher
education programs. However, the lack of in-service training and reactionary provision of resources reflects the more recent critique of teacher education in Ontario that features optional rather than required SHE training (McKay et al., 2014).

Without any training and with few to no resources, these teachers were left with the curriculum and the Fully Alive textbook with which to teach the SHE unit. They expressed difficulties in teaching the rigid curriculum because it prescribed and policed what information was suitable for each grade level. They were reportedly unable to teach any further than their specific grade. This is problematic as it does not reflect the variances in maturity of the students and is logistically difficult for teachers like Dawn who teach grade-blended classes. Dawn speaks about how she approaches language in her Grade Three/Four class: “I use a lot of the Catholic perspective because I can’t go further; delve into the details. I can only go into what it says in grade four and it says ‘sexual intercourse’, I can say that. But again, it’s a special love and bond between parents.” Dawn is limited in that she cannot explain the mechanics or biology of sexual intercourse, which is covered in later grades, and instead calls it a “special love and bond between parents” as she falls back on her Catholic perspective. Sophie also mirrored Dawn’s experience. She explained how she handles topics that are not at grade level:

A lot of it we just read from the textbook to be quite honest with you just to make sure that we stay on focus with what we’re allowed to say and what we’re not allowed to say. ... if questions come up that we’re not sure if we can answer we literally have to throw it back to the kid say that ‘you know what that’s a really great question however I’m not allowed to answer that so I really encourage you to talk to mom or dad about it tonight.’

Here, Sophie explains that she must divert back to parents to dodge what she is “not allowed to say.” While the resources provide structure and talking points for the teachers it also
acts a guide for what is acceptable and what is unacceptable to discuss in the classroom. In this way, the resource is a limitation preventing teachers from answering students’ genuine questions about SHE. The strategy of adhering to the textbook demonstrates how teachers may be afraid of parental backlash and are negotiating school policy; but as Colnerud (2006) summarizes, “one of the problems is finding a balance between loyalty to the institutional assignment and loyalty to the needs of the pupil” (p. 380). This negotiation of loyalty is personal for each teacher, and though they can sometimes ask a colleague for advice, their actions are a reflection of their own values.

Dawn and Sophie’s experiences are shared by other teachers who have seen school policy as a limitation to teaching SHE (Eisenberg et al., 2013; Martinez & Phillips, 2008). The perception of age-appropriate material and the restriction of teaching to the textbook can be difficult for teachers to navigate. On the one hand, they must respect what the curriculum deems as ‘age appropriate’. On the other hand, they are forced to limit the amount of information they can share even if students are curious.

4.3.2 Parent reactions and communication. In addition to following the curriculum being a barrier, like those in the literature (e.g., Barr, Goldfarb, Russell, Seabert, Wallen, & Wilson, 2014; Cohen et al., 2012; Martinez & Phillips, 2008), Sophie and Bernard were cautious of parents’ reactions to their SHE classes, though Dawn did not fear parent responses from her community. Sophie outlined her fears clearly:

well yeah only cause you don’t know what these kids are going to come out with after. And are we going to get into hot water? Are we going to get those parent phone calls? ‘How dare you ask my kid!’ Because some parents will think that’s getting into, you know, private life. . . . ‘are you painting me as, us as poor parents because were not, or
that we got divorced or that I didn’t remarry?’ . . . Um so it, you’re always fearful. Cause then it’s like ‘how do I get myself out of this situation?’

Sophie, like other teachers in the present study, was fearful that delivering SHE curriculum could be perceived as overstepping the boundary between teacher and parent (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). Furthermore, she was worried that the Catholic perspective was portraying the parents negatively. Sophie did have an encounter with a parent before teaching the updated curriculum. A parent approached her who was unhappy with the new curriculum, and as she described it, was on a “rampage” questioning Sophie’s Catholic values, the explicit language, and the ideas of dating that he had heard from the media about the curriculum and not from the curriculum itself. This father’s concern with Sophie’s personal values also recalls ethical researchers’ dilemma as to whether personal opinions can or should be removed from the classroom (Barrett, 2015; Campbell, 2003; Hess & McAvoy, 2009; Scarfo & Zuker, 2011; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011).

Though Bernard did not have a negative encounter with parents he discussed sending letters home to parents prior to starting the SHE units to advise them of potential topics their children may ask them about. He reported experiencing some resistance from parents such as those who chose to remove their children from the SHE classes overall, and said that with the release some parents in the community were angry. Dawn alternatively did not appear to fear parents’ reactions. When asked if the school held information sessions for the community, she expressed that she did not believe there was a need because parents were not concerned about the material. Dawn perceives that the families in her school community do not practice their faith which may explain her lack of fear of parental backlash. Bernard’s and Sophie’s experiences indicate that parent reactions may be a barrier to implementing SHE while Dawn’s experiences highlight that
the Catholicity of the community may be a mediating factor to how parents interact with teachers regarding SHE.

4.3.3 Perceptions of others’ challenges: Religiosity and age. Most interestingly, when the participants were asked about their colleagues’ reactions to the new curriculum, the themes of religiosity and age emerged from their answers. Dawn reflected that she did not always feel comfortable teaching SHE. When she was first teaching, she found it difficult perhaps because of her own lack of sexual health education during childhood and adolescence. Sophie herself is comfortable teaching SHE, but spoke of a colleague who was nervous to teach SHE and described her as “extremely Catholic.” Sophie identified a difference in religiosity between herself and her colleague. Her colleague may align closer to those in the literature who feel they must censor their own conservative beliefs because of curriculum (Cohen et al., 2012; Martinez & Phillips, 2008). Sophie herself identified the school community as Catholic, and identifies herself as Catholic, but acknowledges those who are “extreme” Catholics perhaps follow rules more strictly and would be uncomfortable with talking about sex as it is outlined in the new curriculum.

Bernard presented the caveat that ‘everyone’ was hesitant when the new curriculum came out; however, he felt that those who were resistant would be “of the old school” and of the mentality of “fire and brimstone”. He stated that what it means to be Catholic is changing. He perceived that in the past Catholics strictly followed the rules and that those of the mentality of “fire and brimstone” believe in punishment for breaking the rules. Like Sophie, he also recognized that religiosity exists on a spectrum. He continued to explain that “most of the staffing now is 55 and younger. I think a lot of those raised in that period might be moving on kind of thing.” Dawn’s reflection stated earlier and Bernard’s comment reflect Cohen et al.’s
(2012) finding that younger teachers tend to be more willing to teach SHE. It is significant that Bernard’s comment pulls together the two demographics of religiosity and age and associates being more strictly Catholic with a generation that is older than 55. For those like Sophie’s colleague, the two ideas of Catholicism and sexuality cannot easily coexist in the same space, but if we return to Bernard’s explanation to his students, “God created us as sexual beings,” we can see that there are strategies to adhere to Catholicism and find space for sexual health education.

4.4 Strategies for Implementation Related to Catholicism

Each candidate talked about how they used their own religiosity to present the material from a Catholic perspective. I will first outline the general teaching strategies the teachers used followed by highlighting the ways in which Catholicism guides their teaching practice.

The teachers revealed teaching strategies that evolved from their Catholic perspectives. This theme diverges from the literature as it examines specifically how the individual Catholic identity of each teacher emerges in the sex education classroom. Dawn used Catholicism to answer the question ‘where do babies come from?’ by saying that “your mother and your father loved each other so much they prayed really hard . . . and they really hoped for a miracle to happen. They love each other very much and they hug each other in a special way.” Dawn knew that explaining how sexual intercourse works is a topic reserved for a later than Grade Four and so she used the belief that children are a gift from God to explain the meaning behind parents deciding to have a child.

With regards to teaching morals and values, Bernard stated that it is “nice” that he can use Jesus as a role model. He perceived that Jesus’s story “teaches kids about being a good person and [he] thinks in today’s world more so than ever we need leaders out there with a solid moral background.” When asked about her own religiosity, Sophie shared that she is “semi-
religious” but it “guides who [she] is” and helps her teach students right from wrong even though she does not go to mass every week. She separates the idea of practicing all the rituals of Catholicism from her ability to be a good Catholic educator. She prioritizes Catholic morals and values, or rights and wrong, over the practice of attending mass. Sophie’s self-reported religiosity is evidence of the idea that some educators teach certain values in the classroom that they do not uphold in their personal lives (Campbell, 2003). It is complicated, however, by the fact that Sophie blurs the definition of a practicing Catholic and a Catholic educator.

4.5 Teachers’ Compassion for Students Regarding Controversial Topics

Sophie’s blurring of religiosity and being a Catholic educator is a theme that emerged for all the participants through their responses to controversial topics in the classroom. Research has shown that some teachers choose to teach against Catholic values because they believe the content is more important (Martinez & Phillips, 2008), while others censor their perspectives to adhere to Catholic values (Cohen et al., 2012; Martinez & Phillips, 2008). For these teacher participants, identifying their own range of religiosity allowed them to interpret Catholic doctrine in a way that prioritizes the value of compassion and needs of their students over strict right and wrong Catholic interpretations of controversial topics. What I mean by this is that even though the teachers implemented negotiation strategies that caused them to de-emphasize some aspects of Catholic doctrine, they did not feel as though they were censoring or misrepresenting their own Catholic position. The participants used Catholic perspectives in their responses to controversial topics that are often perceived as at odds with the Catholic faith. All three teachers identified that students would seek their approval of experiences that are categorized as wrong by the Catholic faith, and I will use these instances of divorce, LGBTQ topics, and contraception and abortion to explore their negotiation strategies.
4.5.1 Divorce. The teacher participants shared their strategies for considering students’ family structures while teaching SHE. Dawn acknowledged that some students might be adopted or live with legal guardians as opposed to their parents, so when talking about ‘how mom and dad made the child,’ she is careful to not offend or upset the kids and tries to learn about students’ home lives leading up to the SHE unit. Sophie was particularly aware of students with parents who are separated or divorced. She recounted one student’s experience: “I had one boy whose parents are divorced. Dad’s living with the girlfriend, so a common-law relationship, they’ve been together for a few years now. And he heard them… [having sex]. Um, But [my student] was really concerned, ‘is that OK, because they’re not married?’”. When students asked her if their real live situations were “acceptable” she “puts the curriculum aside and says it’s fine”. For Sophie, the ultimate consideration is the students’ safety and well-being as opposed to telling them that the Catholic Church frowns on divorce. Colnerud (2006) explains the internal dilemma that teachers experience regarding upholding the values of the institution versus the needs of the pupil. Dawn and Sophie, in these instances and by the virtue of Catholic compassion, choose the needs of the pupil over the values of the institution.

4.5.2 Topics on LGBTQ identities. While divorce and separation are more commonly accepted in today’s society, LGBTQ rights are relatively new and still a debated issue within Catholicism. Dawn reported that same-sex relationships have not been a topic of discussion amongst her Grade Threes and Fours. Sophie and Bernard are however proactive in discussing same-sex attraction and relationships to make students feel accepted, and represent the cohort of teachers who are comfortable discussing LGBTQ topics in the classroom (Martinez & Phillips, 2008). Sophie uses media to bring up LGBTQ topics and summarized that “the majority [of students] are very accepting of the whole situation”. She notes that many students share that they
have family members who are gay and can relate to the topic. With the students, it is about explaining that “it’s ok to have those conversations and still love [gay family members] cause they’re still human beings . . . yeah it’s all about acceptance at this age they want to know what is good and are we ok to like them and love them even though they’re not the same values as me”. Like Sophie, Bernard distinguishes between values regarding LGBTQ rights and Catholic doctrine. He teases out the distinction of respecting others despite Catholicism as an institution ostracizing queer identities:

you might not totally agree with what they’re doing and it might go against my grain as a Catholic but you know what that’s their deal. This is a good person and . . . they are a creation of God as well. And they are accorded the same respect as anybody else and you might have your own personal view point, but that shouldn’t taint the way you treat others.

Bernard identifies the value of respect as distinctly Catholic. Sophie and Bernard both view LGBTQ topics as perhaps not in line with Catholic values pertaining to sexuality and marriage, but view the values of compassion and respect as more important when teaching students. They actively negotiate sharing the views of the Church, but reportedly deemphasize the actions of the Church and highlight the importance of respect for the sake of their students.

4.5.3 Contraception and abortion. While the Catholic school system historically promotes abstinence as the primary method for STI and pregnancy prevention, individual Catholic practices with regards to contraception and abortion vary. For Bernard, although the Catholic Church does not promote contraception he believes that “in our reality if someone’s going to engage in that activity I’d rather them be safe. Safe for their own body welfare”. He adamantly disagrees, however, with abortion and shares this view with his students. Bernard
acknowledges that the curriculum includes information about contraception and uses this fact to support his decision to teach contraception. Abortion does not align with his Catholic values and so he teaches the students the Catholic perspective. Like some teachers, Bernard chose to view contraception as a positive aspect of SHE despite Catholic values (Martinez & Phillips, 2008), but is also loyal to the institution on the subject of abortion. Though Dawn does not have to discuss these topics with her Grade Threes and Fours, when asked about how she would respond if asked if she would share her personal opinion with a student she quickly asserted that

   no no no I would not, because you know what, you’re a teacher and you’re a person of authority, but you’re also their guide and guidance and you don’t want to sway them with your own personal opinion. ... All the time I try to stay neutral with my students.

Dawn’s reasoning as to why she should not share her personal opinion aligns with research that finds that some teachers recognize their authority and use neutrality in an attempt not to abuse their position of power (Campbell, 2003; Hess & McAvoy, 2009; Scarfo & Zuker, 2011). It is noteworthy that Bernard has chosen which aspects of Catholic doctrine supersede the feeling of a student as accepted in the classroom environment. Meanwhile, it is an academic and professional exercise to question whether Dawn if faced with teaching controversial topics would give her opinion or align with Catholic doctrine.

4.6 Conclusion

   In this chapter I presented the findings from interviews I conducted with three Catholic elementary school teachers who have experience teaching sexual health education. From the analysis of the interviews, teachers’ perspectives emerged about the necessity of SHE, the controversy over SHE, the limitations to implementing SHE and ethical strategies used to implement SHE. The teachers felt that the new SHE curriculum was necessary because of the
reality that students are encountering sex and forming relationships at the middle school age. They also presented opinions that the controversy over the curriculum was unnecessary based on their opinions of the curriculum and the minimal backlash they experienced from their respective communities. Finally, I identified the limitations the teachers encountered and the ethical strategies the teachers implemented in order to teach the SHE curriculum. These interviews revealed that the participants were comfortable implementing the new Ontario SHE curriculum, and that their Catholic identities informed their approach to controversial topics. In Chapter Five I will discuss the broad implications for the educational community including administration, policy and curriculum writers, teacher education institutions, and teachers. I will outline the implications for my own teacher identity and practice and lastly, I will make recommendations for further areas of research on the topic of sexual health education in Catholic schools.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.0 Chapter Introduction

In this chapter, I will present the key findings from my study and their significance to Catholic sexual health education. First, I will discuss both the broad implications for education as a whole. Next I will reflect on the implications my study has for my own professional identity as a Catholic teacher and what this means for individual teacher practice. Lastly, I will make recommendations for school boards, teacher education programs, and teachers themselves based on my findings and suggest areas for further research into teacher religious identity and equity.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

My research studied the experiences of three Grades Three to Eight Catholic teachers and their experiences implementing the sexual health education strand (SHE) of the Ontario 2015 Health and Physical Education Curriculum (HPE). Through semi-structured interviews five key themes emerged: the teacher-participants feel that SHE is necessary in their Catholic classrooms; the controversy surrounding SHE may be at other grade levels, and not in their own; they experienced limitations such as a lack of training, fear of parental backlash, and ‘strict’ religiosity; Catholic perspectives supported the teachers ability to navigate questions about sex and relationships; and the Catholic value of compassion was prioritized over Catholic doctrine with regards to controversial topics.

Given the controversy covered in the media regarding including SHE in Ontario classrooms, all three teacher participants agreed that students’ exposure to sex in society necessitates providing them knowledge on sex and relationships. The participants taught Grades Three and Four, Grade Six, and Grade Eight which demonstrates that this finding can span students from ages eight to thirteen. Despite the Catholic stances on sex before marriage,
divorce, and LGBTQ identities, all three teachers felt that it was more important to provide students with information along with Catholic values to maintain students’ safety and wellbeing. The teacher-participants’ views are in opposition to the curriculum protests, but also reveal that Catholicism and SHE are not necessarily exclusive. Furthermore, the teacher’s support of SHE caused them to seek controversy in other Grade’s sex education material.

The three teachers did experience some limitations in line with literature such as a lack of in-service and/or pre-service training and fear of parental backlash, though experiences with parental backlash were minimal or singular. The teachers did not feel their level of religiosity interfered with their teaching though the participants identified some colleagues as ‘strict’ in their faith, who did experience internal conflict teaching SHE. This internal conflict was suggested to be due to the young age of the colleague’s students or because of their views of LGBTQ issues.

The last two themes are similar as teacher-participants exercised strategies based on their Catholic perspectives in order to navigate discussing sex and relationships. They also used the Catholic value of compassion to negotiate the ethics of topics such as divorce, LGBTQ issues, and abortion and contraceptives. The teachers all felt it was necessary to act out of compassion when Catholic doctrine contradicted the reality of student’s lives. For example, if a student asked if their family was acceptable if their parents were divorced or and aunt or uncle was gay the teachers assured them that God loves their family the way they are. In considering their own religiosity, each teacher prioritized compassion for students’ wellbeing over the Catholic interpretations of controversial topics.

These themes fill a gap in existing research on SHE as it pertains particularly to the Catholic teacher’s experience. This research suggests that Catholicism is not a binary identity,
but rather Catholic teachers may identify their religiosity based on what they believe and what practices they follow. Additionally, the emergent themes demonstrate that Catholicism is not simply in opposition to sex and relationships, but exists simultaneously and that teachers are constantly negotiating this relationship while teaching SHE. Next, I will explore the implications that emerge from these themes for both education as a whole and for individual teacher practice.

5.2 Implications

This section will explore the implications of the teacher-participants’ experiences implementing SHE in the Catholic classroom. I will first explore the broad implications for the educational community including administration, policy and curriculum writers, teacher education institutions, and teachers. Secondly, I will look at the implications for my own professional identity as a Catholic educator and how this may affect my future practice.

5.2.1 Implications for the educational community. The teacher-participants identified that they were given the Fully Alive textbook and were expected to read it and teach it. The participants did not recall pre-service training and were only provided in-service professional learning if principals recognized an explicit community need. This suggests that while many teachers may be comfortable teaching SHE in a Catholic setting, other teachers may not be receiving the support they require if they are not vocal about their needs. If a principal does not recognize the need for training, some teachers may feel unequipped to facilitate Catholic SHE. Additionally, the three teacher-participants attended teacher education approximately between 1990-2010 and did not recall receiving education on sex education. This suggests that teachers already in Catholic schools may not have explicit training on SHE. In my experience in the pre-service religious education course, many students asked about how to address student questions about divorce and LGBTQ identities. Our instructor did not pre-emptively teach about strategies
to negotiate these situations and did not encourage further discussion after briefly answering questions. This leads me to believe that Catholic pre-service teachers may still not have an opportunity to discuss the challenges of negotiating Catholic doctrine while teaching SHE. The teacher-participants’ reliance on the Fully Alive text suggests that they may not seek external resources for SHE and place an emphasis Catholic SHE curricula writer’s role and place in the classroom. Administrators, teacher education institutions, and Catholic SHE curricula writers all directly impact Catholic teachers’ implementation of SHE.

Administrators, teacher education, and Catholic curricula resources affect the tools and supports available for teachers; however, the teachers own Catholic positioning and perspectives influence their interactions with students. The teacher-participants’ unanimous opinion that SHE is necessary in their Catholic classrooms suggests that many Catholic teachers may feel the same way. Their lack of concern with the SHE curriculum topics also seems to discredit the notion of the curriculum as controversial. These teachers after stating they did not see any controversy, began to question other grades’ curricula. This implies that perhaps there is nothing controversial about the curriculum at all. While the nature of the controversy was not evident in the interviews, the teachers did express some limitations to implementing SHE.

As discussed above, the teacher-participants felt limited by administrative support and in-service or pre-service training. The limitation of parental backlash suggests that teachers may be censoring their teaching to avoid potential conflict. Teacher-participants relied heavily on the Fully Alive textbook as a support they could refer to in the case of parental conflict, despite the minimal report of actual lived parental conflict. Teachers’ religiosity may also influence their delivery of SHE. Teacher-participants observed that ‘strict Catholic’ colleagues followed doctrine closely, and were uncomfortable teaching SHE. This suggests that it is not Catholicism
itself that is at odds with SHE, but rather that an individual’s interpretation of the Catholic faith may conflict with SHE on a personal level.

Each participant provided examples or scenarios in which they used their interpretation of the Catholic faith in order to answer student’s questions about sex and relationships. The teachers’ ability to use their faith supports the idea that it is an individuals’ religiosity that might impact the delivery of Catholic SHE. Additionally, the teacher-participant’s emphasis on compassion for students instead of Catholic doctrinal views, connects Catholic SHE with the negotiation of teachers’ personal ethics. Curricula writers, teacher education institutes, school administration, and teachers themselves may tend to avoid talking about SHE which seems to be fueling the notion of controversy. Minimal communication between each stakeholder in the educational community may limit the improvement of teachers’ implementation of Catholic SHE, due to a lack of collaboration.

5.2.2 Implications for my teacher identity and practice. Speaking with practicing Catholic teachers with differing years of experience provided insight into what it looks like to be a Catholic educator. My research problem stemmed from the social-political reality of the tension created by the release of the new HPE curriculum, but also my desire to understand what it means for me to be a Catholic educator. Interviewing the participants, I discovered that their Catholic faith guides their actions in the classroom. From planning the discussions and activities for the SHE classes to responding to student questions, each teacher-participant demonstrated that SHE can be in harmony with the Catholic faith. This implies that if I use my faith to guide my practice I can present controversial topics like sexual orientation and gender identity as harmonious with Catholicism.
Furthermore, these interviews challenged my view that many teachers are struggling with teaching SHE. The teacher-participants shared that there are some teachers who are uncomfortable, but that in their experience they and their colleagues were able to teach SHE with a Catholic perspective. My beliefs in contrast to their experiences suggest that I have been influenced by the media coverage of the 2015 HPE Curriculum. This also may suggest that I have the challenge of working through my own Catholic educator identity in order to determine how I will use my own faith in the classroom when discussing potentially controversial ideas or topics.

My personal questions about Catholic SHE considered the reality of students in our society. If students are being sexually active how can I promote safety while adhering to the Catholic doctrine? The teacher-participants’ choices to value compassion and the reality of students’ lived experiences over doctrine suggests that I can also reconcile my Catholicity with providing support for my future students.

Lastly, I found that I was pleasantly surprised by my teacher-participants’ overall comfort with Catholicism, SHE, and equity. In my experiences, shaped by my upbringing, media, and community, Catholicism and equity with regards to LGBTQ issues have been presented as contrary and irreconcilable. The teacher-participants’ shared that the Catholic faith allowed them to accept all of their students and helped them feel like they could support students if they identified as LGBTQ. This shows me that in my own practice I can maintain my beliefs regarding LGBTQ issues and can support my students within a Catholic context.

5.3 Recommendations

Starting at the school level, it is important for Catholic principals to gauge their teachers’ comfort and approach to teaching sexual health education. This could be through an anonymous
survey, staff meetings, or focus groups. This will help the principal bring in speakers or suggest resources to support teachers in implementing Catholic SHE. Teachers themselves need to be vocal about their approach to Catholic SHE and model that Catholicism can and does indeed incorporate sexual health.

Considering the teacher-participants’ comfortable implementation of Catholic SHE and varying levels of religiosity, it is important that Catholic educators have an opportunity to discuss and explore what it means for them to be Catholic educators in light of the societal discussions around equity. This should take place in pre-service training during the Catholic Teacher Preparation course, but also during in-service professional learning as cultural climate is constantly changing and moving. If teachers have a clear or deeper understanding of their role as a Catholic educator their modelling and delivery of Catholic education will be more beneficial for students. It will also benefit teachers who are uncomfortable teaching SHE. Additionally, a general course on ethics in teacher education should be mandatory.

Lastly, for the greater community and province, it is important that parents and media are made aware of the actual contents of the 2015 HPE Curriculum. It is the responsibility of the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Catholic School Boards to invest in public relations to resolve the controversy and furthermore reduce the impression of wide-spread controversy. This will alleviate barriers such as the removal of students from SHE classes and increase public trust in the public Catholic education system. The teacher-participants’ reliance on the Fully Alive textbook identifies that Catholic SHE curriculum writers should be wary of what they choose to include, exclude, or how they choose to focus their lessons. It is important for Catholic educators to share their voices concerning the importance of Catholic SHE.
5.4 Areas for Further Research

The teacher-participants of this research project identified that Catholic educators have different levels of religiosity which can affect their teaching. Educational research on religious education tends to ignore religiosity in favour of a binary self-identification of religious or not. Further research into religiosity could lead to the development of teacher practice and discussion of controversial issues, but also contribute to the discussion of fostering spiritual students. The teacher-participants’ experiences of negotiating their Catholic faith controversial topics in addition to their labelling of themselves and colleagues on a spectrum of religiosity may present a challenge to educational researchers. The concept of religiosity is not quantifiable in any concrete way which limits research on this topic to self-reporting which has been historically difficult to verify.

Further research for Catholic students could examine how students receive Catholic SHE in contrast to SHE delivered in Ontario public schools. Just as teachers have varying levels of religiosity so do Catholic students and their families. This research can support teachers in how they deliver Catholic SHE and give insight to Catholic teachers who are uncomfortable teaching SHE. Furthermore, this study can be expanded to other religious identities. The media coverage of the 2015 HPE Curriculum included a focus on Muslim parents who were upset with the update. Understanding how other religious identities incorporate SHE can provide a greater understanding of how best to educate students in Ontario.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The findings from this research project suggest that SHE is an important topic in the Catholic classroom, that the controversy around the Ontario 2015 HPE may be limited to a select group of loud voices, that Catholic teachers need to feel more support in implementing SHE, and
that Catholic perspectives and compassion are key tools that support Catholic students’ wellbeing. For all Catholic, religious, or non-religious students it is important to understand how teachers’ positioning affects the delivery and reception of sexual health education. In our society we rely on the education system to teach key concepts and lessons for all students to grow into meaningful and healthy members of society. Digging deeper into the preparedness of our teachers will only better their delivery of curriculum and furthermore the state of our future society.

The findings of my research project are significant for me because they have validated my desire for equity through SHE to work within a Catholic framework. The teacher-participants’ value of compassion for students and their wellbeing through the Catholic doctrine provides hope that Catholic education has not been and does not have to villainize identities that do not explicitly fit into their definitions of relationships. This research matters for all Catholic students who feel they might not have a place in the Catholic faith or who are concerned that their family situation does not ‘belong.’ This research matters for Catholic teachers like me who wish to support all Catholic LGBTQ students and recognize the value of each student in our classrooms. Most, importantly this research matters for the Catholic teachers who are unsure how to support students when teaching SHE. It is my hope that further research into Catholic and religious teacher identities will help us implement supportive and impactful Catholic SHE.
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References


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. As a Catholic student in a pre-service teaching program, I am interested in learning how a sample of Catholic teachers are experiencing and implementing the sexual health strand of the 2015 Health and Physical Education curriculum in schools. Findings obtained from this study may be informative for not only current and preservice Catholic teachers, but ethics policy-makers, and leaders within the values based educational community. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of an approximately 60 minute interview that will be audio recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my data will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no other known risks to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,

Theresa Bryce
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Theresa Bryce and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name (printed): __________________________________

Date: _____________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for participating in my research study. The aim of this research is to learn how a sample of Catholic junior grade teachers are experiencing the implementation of the Sexual Health education strand of the 2015 Health and Physical Education Curriculum. Over the next 60 minutes, I’m hoping to learn about your own experiences, given your religious identity, with this new curriculum. As a Catholic Teacher Candidate myself I am interested to see how Catholic teachers are approaching the new curriculum. The interview protocol begins with your background, followed by questions about your experiences with Fully Alive and the new curriculum, then the supports and/or barriers to the implementation of the curriculum, and lastly, questions your strategies or practices for teaching the curriculum and next steps for teachers. I want to remind you that you can choose not to answer any question, and can remove yourself from participation at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

To begin can you state your name for the recording?

Section A – Background Information

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. What grades and subjects do you currently teach?

a. Which have you previously taught?

3. Have you always taught in Catholic schools?

   a. Why is this?

4. Can you describe the community in which your school is situated? (i.e. diversity and socioeconomic status)
a. How long have you taught in this school?

5. Can you describe the atmosphere in your school with regards to Catholicism?

6. As you know I’m interested in how Catholic teachers implement sex education in the classroom. Can you tell me what your religious identity means to you/what role it plays in your life?
   a. raised or convert, religiosity, attendance, participant in which sacraments, agree with all values, partner/family/children also (practicing) Catholic
   b. Do you identify with a particular domination, sect or tradition within Catholicism?

Section B – Fully Alive and the 2015 Curriculum

7. Do you remember experiencing sex education as a K-12 student?
   a. (if yes) Was it in a Catholic or secular school?
   b. Can you describe how it went?
      i. PROMPTS: STIs, safe sex, LGBTQ issues, types of sex, parent/family involvement, high school or elementary school, co-ed or single sex, within Catholic framework (marriage/heteronormative love)

8. How do you think this experience affects how you teach sex education today?

9. How did you feel about the Fully Alive curriculum prior to the release of the new 2015 curriculum?

10. How did you feel when you found about the content of the 2015 curriculum?
    a. Are there aspects of the new curriculum that you personally feel strongly about?
    b. If you could change anything about the 2015 sex ed curriculum what would you change and why?
11. Can you tell me about other teachers’ responses in your school to the new 2015 Health and Physical Education Curriculum?
   a. Which changes do you think will pose problems for Catholic teachers?

Section C – Teaching Strategies and Practices
12. Can you walk me through your typical planning process for a sex education lesson?

13. Can you tell me about a sex education lesson that you felt was particularly successful?
   a. Personal knowledge/training on the topic
   b. Resources: videos, guest teachers, demonstrations
   c. Learning goals or curriculum integration
   d. Catholic values as a guide
   e. Class structure: interactive/inquiry based, discussion based, stand and deliver
   f. Student responses
   g. Do it again/changes for the future

14. (If applicable) Have you found that age or grade level impacts how you teach sex education?

15. Have you ever asked for or received advice from other teachers in regards to teaching sex education?

16. Can you tell me about a time when you felt your Catholic identity affected the way you taught sex education?
   a. Avoidance or focus on certain topics?
   b. Comfort/discomfort with material

Section D – Supports and Limitations to Curriculum Implementation
17. Can you describe your school and school community’s overall response to the 2015 curriculum?
   a. If yes: positive/negative, general concerns, opinions discussed in public (staff meetings) or in private (within department)

18. Have you experienced or witnessed any encounters with parents or local community members regarding the 2015 curriculum? Please describe.
   a. If yes, did the encounter(s) affect your sex ed lessons?
   b. Have you heard of parents withdrawing their child(ren) from sex ed classes?
      i. Your opinion on this?

19. Can you tell me about a time when a student asked about your personal opinion on sex or sex education?
   a. advice about personal scenarios familial or romantic relationships, gender/sexual identity, sexual acts
      i. Did you factor the Catholic school curriculum/ suggested answer?
      ii. If a friend has asked you the same thing would you have changed your answer?

20. As a Catholic Teacher Candidate what advice to you have for me entering the profession?

21. Do you have any final thoughts?

Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses. Is there anything else you’d like to add or ask me before we end?