Sexual Health Education Implementation Challenges: Teacher Experiences with the Revised 2015 Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum in Diverse Schools

By

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Abstract

Controversy has been a defining feature of the sexual health education curriculum since its introduction in the early 20th century (Morgan, 2000). The announcement and subsequent implementation of the revised 2015 Ontario Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum saw a resurgence of opposition in some diverse schools and communities throughout the province, specifically the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Although sexual health education has been widely discussed and researched, there is limited data on the implementation of sexual health education in Canada or Ontario and the data that is available is generally not current. For this qualitative research study I conducted semi-structured interviews with two current elementary teachers from GTA school boards, who identified that their diverse schools were coping with challenges implementing the revised 2015 HPE curriculum. The interviews revealed five main themes, each with associated subthemes: 1) Community demographics and influence; 2) Parent response to the implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum; 3) Teacher feelings and experiences with the initial implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum; 4) Impact of implementation of revised 2015 HPE curriculum on teaching practices; and 5) Curriculum content concerns. The findings from this research study highlight a need for more comprehensive support from the educational community for teachers and schools that have challenges implementing the revised 2015 Ontario HPE curriculum.

Key Words: Sexual health education, implementation challenges, diverse schools, support, controversy
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction: The Research Context

Sexual health education (SHE) has a long and contentious history in our society that is not limited to the past, but rather, continues to permeate our society today. The topic of sexual education elicits powerful reactions and controversy, which arguably transcend other disagreements or challenges. Although the supporters of comprehensive SHE have distinct reasons for supporting these curricula they commonly share a guiding principle, which is that SHE, needs to “prepare [students] for the reality and responsibilities of sexual behaviour” (McCall et al., 2004, p. 597). Like the supporters, the opponents of sexual education have a number of different reasons for objecting to this curriculum, but a shared belief is that of traditional values (Irvine, 2002; Halstead & Reiss, 2003; Archard, 1998). While these two contrasting sides appear to be discrete groups, they arguably enclose a spectrum that encases a collection of views on this sensitive topic.

In 2015, the government of Ontario announced the upcoming release and implementation of the revised Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum for both elementary and secondary schools. The previous HPE curriculum being taught in classrooms had not been updated since 1998, and therefore, did not include many of the significant and emerging topics present in the revised 2015 version. It is critical to note that in 2010, the Premier Dalton McGuinty, announced the release of a revised HPE, which included the updated Human Development and Sexual Health (SHE) component, but quickly withdrew it after receiving backlash from various organizations and individuals (Benzie, 2010). A number of the topics included in the briefly implemented 2010 revision are now included in the 2015 version.
The revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum emphasizes integrating Living Skills throughout each strand and objective. The use of Personal Skills (PS), Interpersonal Skills (IS) and Critical and Creative Thinking (CT) sections that appear throughout the document contribute to the Living Skills objectives for each grade. The curriculum is additionally comprised of three key strands: Active Living, Movement Competence: Skills, Concepts and Strategies, and Healthy Living. Each of these key strands has associated sub-strands that support the learning goals and objectives (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 3). The Ontario HPE curriculum includes the Human Development and Sexual Health (SHE) component (often referred to as sexual education or ‘sex ed’) as a sub-strand within the Healthy Living strand. It is crucial to highlight that the SHE component represents a small portion of the revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum.

Since the release of the revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum, several communities across the province of Ontario have struggled with its implementation. Specifically, some diverse Toronto and Greater Toronto Area (GTA) schools have coped with substantial obstacles from members of the school community and communities at large in implementing the curriculum, particularly the Human Development and Sexual Health (SHE) strand.

The implementation challenges that some GTA schools have experienced with the introduction of the revised 2015HPE curriculum can be illustrated by looking at one North Toronto community, where an elementary school saw attendance decrease by more than half (about 740 students absent) during the peak of the unrest and protests (Rushowy, 2015). Jeff Crane, the principal of Thorncliffe Park, an elementary school in the GTA which has been deeply impacted by the announcement of the HPE curriculum, explained that in lieu of attending formal school, parents and community members were “holding teaching sessions in groups at a park near the school and in local community centres using books from Costco” during this time.
(Crane, 2015). The protests were not limited to student withdrawal; parents, community members, and religious leaders were distributing opposition material and holding protests outside schools (Rushowy, 2015). Furthermore, schools were vandalized, picketed, and received threats in relation to the implementation of the revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum. These issues have garnered attention from supporters, opponents, and those who fall somewhere between on the spectrum of support or opposition. This powerful reaction to sexual health education is not new, but rather a defining feature of this contentious curriculum. Irvine (2002), illustrates this by describing experiences in which, “sex education conflicts aroused passion that bordered on violence. Some school administrators reported death threats” (p. 43).

The intense opposition and disruption these schools and communities are dealing with due to the implementation of the revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum points to a need for increased understanding and research in implementing controversial curriculum in diverse communities.

1.1 Articulation of the Research Problem

Since the recent implementation of the revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum, there has been a resurgence of opposition and conflict in several communities around the province of Ontario. Halstead and Reiss (2013) examined similar challenging situations regarding sexual education and found that:

When it comes to opinions about sex, people all too often inhabit different worlds; speak different languages, with incompatible and widely divergent views. The situation is further complicated by differences compounded by gender, social class, culture and other factors, and by the existence of numerous pressure groups, each with a different engendered views... (p. 15).
The increase of conflict over the HPE curriculum exposes the presence of these different views in a distinctive way. As such, there are a number of emerging trends that require further research. Specifically, several schools in diverse neighbourhoods in Toronto and the GTA have been struggling to implement the curriculum since its announcement. Research by McKay, Byers, Voyer, Humphreys and Markham, (2014) stresses the importance of “the collection of quantities of data that more precisely account for possible ethno-cultural differences in parents’ perspectives towards sexual health education” (p. 166). This means conducting meaningful research on emerging trends, and teachers are an integral part of this multifaceted issue.

In this research study I explored the challenges in implementing the revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum for teachers in some diverse elementary schools in the GTA.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

In view of the curriculum implementation challenges, this research study was developed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges teachers are having in some diverse schools in the GTA, and to identify the support educators need to implement the revised 2015 HPE curriculum in their classrooms.

1.3 Research Questions

This study aimed to address the following research question: What are the challenges that elementary teachers have in implementing the revised Ontario 2015 Health and Physical Education curriculum in diverse schools?

Related sub-questions will include:

1. What are the key factors (or emerging trends) that are contributing to the revised 2015 HPE implementation challenges?
2. What supports are available to teachers in schools with implementation challenges for the revised 2015 HPE curriculum?

3. How can teachers in schools with revised 2015 HPE curriculum implementation challenges be further supported in the diverse classrooms?

In light of these questions it is necessary to identify the methodology that was used to conduct the research that aims to answer these questions. Per the guides of the Masters of Teaching Research Paper (MTRP) I have conducted a qualitative study, utilizing semi-structured interviews. Due to the sensitive and human nature of this topic, qualitative research is the most fitting as it accounts for the meaning that is constructed by human beings through social interaction in their world and the realities and meanings associated with this (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative research accepts that the data and interpretations relate to a specific point in time, and within a specific context that is not stagnant (Merriam, 2002). The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded to ensure accuracy and to maintain the ethical procedures required for this research paper. Following the transcription, the data was analyzed through various levels of coding. The ultimate goal of the coding process was to synthesize emergent themes and derive meanings and findings from the interviews. It is critical to note that prior to the commencement of the 45- 60 minute interviews the participants understood and acknowledged their roles and rights by signing a consent form (Appendix A) that outlines these factors.

1.4 Background of the Researcher

A fundamental principle that guides my teaching philosophy is that education should be holistic and consider the well being of each individual student. This means providing comprehensive education that is meaningful and accessible to all students. To achieve this, I believe that education needs to reflect the fluid and changing nature of society. This can best be
understood as a form of critical theory, as it considers both the current social reality and identifies ways to change it, in order to reach practical goals (Johnson, 1995). Critical theory in education can be understood as questioning and identifying ways in which the educational system can make education accessible to all (McLaren & Giarelli, 1995). The process of change central to critical theory is necessary to ensure that students are obtaining a comprehensive education that meets the needs all of all, not the few.

A few years ago I had the unique and wonderful experience of working at a school in Toronto in an after school program that is designed for underserved and diverse students and families. This opportunity profoundly impacted me both personally and professionally. When the revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum guidelines were released, the school community struggled with the upcoming introduction of the curriculum in the elementary classrooms. Although the classroom implementation was not set to start until fall 2015, protests and distress spread across the school and the greater community. The issue escalated, and soon the school I was at, and surrounding schools were facing protests, substantial student withdrawal, and threats. These issues and challenges continue to permeate this community and others in Toronto and across the GTA. The disruption demonstrates a need for comprehensive research on implementation challenges associated with the revised 2015 HPE curriculum.

I was deeply influenced by my experiences in this community, and the children and families that I had the opportunity to work with. Experiencing first hand, the disruption that plagued this community following the announcement of the revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum has contributed significantly to my desire to explore this topic.
1.5 Preview of the Whole MTRP

This research paper includes five chapters: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Findings and Implications. Chapter 1 identifies the topic researched, the context of the research, the purpose of the research and my passion for this topic. Chapter 2 is a review of literature exploring previous work in this area, which provides a foundational context for my research. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and procedure utilized in this research study, including participant information, procedures used, ethical review procedures and limitations. Chapter 4, the findings section, provides an analysis of the data in relation to the questions and sub-questions, as well as prior research. Lastly, Chapter 5 outlines a summary of my research findings, broad and narrow implications, and recommendation for the education community, and suggestions for further research.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction to the Chapter

Sexual education has been plagued, if not defined, by controversy and conflict since its modern introduction in the early 20th century (Morgan, 2000). The 2015 revision to the Ontario Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum, specifically at the elementary level, has experienced intense opposition to its implementation in various communities across Ontario. For the purpose of this chapter SHE and HPE are used interchangeably in different articles throughout, both referencing the Human Development and Sexual Health component of HPE curricula. This review of literature seeks to examine this contentious topic of sexual education in schools by exploring the contributing factors that have, and continue to define this area, and the emerging trends that are having a profound impact on the present implementation.

2.1 History of Sexual Health Education

As with any controversial subject it is necessary to delve into the past to understand the present. While much of the literature on the history of sexual education comes from the United States, the research often holds true in Canada. The history introduces the modern introduction of sex education and the long-standing contention that has been a distinguishing feature of this sensitive topic in North America. As early as the 1900’s there has been a demand for “a positive integrated sex education” (Morgan, 2000, p. 104). Morgan (2000) introduced Bigelow, Gruenbery and Galloway as some of the earliest educational advocates for comprehensive sexual education as this was the only way to “meet these deep needs” (p. 104). Irvine (2002) summarizes the earliest forms of sexual education in the United States:

Sex educations story is part of long-standing efforts to regulate sexual morality through control of sexual speech…The first calls for school sex education came in the early 20th
century from a disparate group of moral reformers including suffragist, clergy, temperance workers, and physicians dedicated to eliminating venereal disease. While disagreeing among themselves about the content and purpose of sex education, they nonetheless comprised a relatively unified front arguing for public speech against the restrictive measures (p. 6).

Accounts like this demonstrate that even within advocates of sexual education there is a vast discrepancy in their values and their support for the actual curriculum. Although our society has changed enormously over the last century, these conflicts are still echoed today in the controversy surrounding this sensitive topic.

2.2 Values in Sexual Education

In contemporary society the “role of [the] school [is] to influence, and to some extent reflect the values of society” (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, p. 16). By deciding to provide sex education at all, there is an assumption there will be a value to children (Halstead & Reiss, 2003). As discussed earlier, since sex education’s modern introduction in the early 20th century, the values that guide its development and implementation have been highly debated and opposed. Archard (1998) explains, “it is further true that the different reasons why [or why not] people think sex ought to be taught will make a difference to their views as to how sex ought to be taught” (p. 438). This tension is best explored by acknowledging that many of the issues surrounding it relate to values, are multifaceted, and undeniably contentious (Corngold, 2013). To truly understand and attempt to alleviate the conflict surrounding this sensitive area we first must admit that sex education, as all education, is based on and reflects values within our society.
Halstead and Reiss (2003) explain that, “the diversity that exists in contemporary society makes a consensus on values impossible, especially in a controversial domain like sexuality” (p. 8). The fluidity and the often rapidly changing demographics of communities, present increasingly difficult challenges for government, schools, and educators in implementing controversial curriculum like sexual education.

Our modern system is laden with conflicting values and the disruptions associated with these fundamental disagreements, which are pervasive in some of our local communities. Irvine (2002), illustrates these volatile situations in an example from the United States:

Typically one parent, or a small group, form the epicentre of conflict and were quickly joined by other disgruntled residents... Despite their small numbers, opponents wielded enormous power to challenge school systems, disrupt communities, even dismantle sex education programs... but in other places the sex education conflicts aroused passion that bordered on violence. Some school administrators reported death threats (p. 43).

Sexual education is permeated by values, and with limited consensus on the fundamental principles of sexual morality there is a significant discrepancy in what values should guide sexual health education (Archard, 1998). Therefore, “it is impossible to play out and put into practice any programme of sex education without reference to values.” (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, p. 3).

2.3 The School’s Role in Sexual Health Education

The school is a powerful institution with an influential role in our society today. McCall et al. (1999) explain this role as “the only formal institution to have meaningful contact with nearly every young person, schools are in a unique position to provide education that enables children and adolescents to acquire developmentally appropriate knowledge and skills related to sexual
and reproductive health” (p. 159). In elementary schools the role is arguably more pronounced as it is a place that children and adolescents form their identities as individuals and as citizens (Bickmore, 1999).

Whether or not school is an appropriate site for teaching about sex is facing seemingly as much controversy, if not more, than the content of sex education curriculum itself. While there is disagreement as to if sex education should be part of the curriculum, especially at the elementary level, supporters say that the schools’ unique role in students’ lives powerfully positions it as the best site for this material.

In support of comprehensive sexual education in schools, Archard (1998) explains that “we should teach sex in school. Saying this presumes that if sex is to be taught to young persons it is better, all things considered, at least to teach it in schools” (p. 437). Halstead and Reiss (2003) build on this concept by outlining three goals the school has when developing and delivering curriculum, with particular attention drawn to its impact on sexual education. First is “the influence of the school perhaps helps to counterbalance any extreme opinions and values which the child has picked up elsewhere” (p. 10). This statement is wrought with controversy, and it might benefit them to provide evidence to defend this statement. “The second role is to fill in gaps in the student’s knowledge and understanding” (p. 10). They partially explain this by saying “children will continue to be influenced by other factors [outside of school], including family, peers and the media” (p. 10). “The third role of the school, and perhaps the most important, is to encourage children to choose a rational path with a variety of influences. Children need help to make sense of diversity of sexual values…And gradually, through a process of critical reflection, they will begin to construct and develop their own values” (ibid, p. 10). The idea of a *rational path* is reflected throughout the 2015 Health and Physical Education for elementary schools
curriculum document by using terms like “make informed decisions”, “become informed, productive, caring, responsible, healthy and active citizens” which echo Halstead and Reiss’ points. (OME, 2015, p. 3). Archard (1998) introduces another quite contentious factor in the role of the school for developing and delivering sexual education. This being that there is a “likelihood of parents defaulting any obligation to teach their children about sex” (Archard, 1998, p. 437). This statement presents a disputable but noteworthy reality in today’s society.

On the contrary, a popular belief is that schools’ public profile makes it a troublesome venue for discussing sex (Allred & David, 2007). This idea is developed by saying that “discussing sexuality in schools, threatens the assumption that schools deal with ‘pupils’, who are ‘children’…and [schools] are in the business of tending minds” (Allred & David, 2007, p. 3). I assert, that just as they have defended their argument against sexual education in school, based on schools’ role of, tending minds, they have given the supporters another reason to push for comprehensive sexual education in schools. Allred and David (2007) abdicate some of their defense by saying that although the school is a troublesome setting for sexual education, it “carries the public duty to educate children on this ‘private’ matter” (p. 2).

The controversy and challenges around schools teaching sexual education may never be resolved, as they touch on such sensitive subject matter. Bickmore (1999) notes one of the recurring themes between researchers, regardless of whether they support or oppose sexual education in schools which is that “as public institutions, schools touch nearly every child and provide powerful sanction for certain knowledge” (p. 15). Regardless of one’s stance on this topic, the unique and powerful role the school has in our society cannot be ignored—ideally it should be harnessed to do what is best for the students, communities, and the world.
2.4 Teachers and Sexual Health Education

In order to thoroughly examine the challenges of integrating the revised Ontario HPE curriculum into the public school system in Ontario, we must explore the roles of the teacher and the obstacles faced. As Morgan (2000) illustrates since its introduction to schools, “integrated sex education depended heavily on enlightened public school teachers” (p. 105). Within the revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum document the role of educators is explicitly stated in several ways:

Educators play an important role in promoting children and youth’s well-being by creating, fostering, and sustaining a learning environment that is healthy, caring, safe, inclusive, and accepting. A learning environment of this kind will support not only students’ cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development but also their mental health, their resilience, and their overall state of well-being. All this will help them achieve their full potential in school and in life. (p. 3)

While I believe that this concept should guide all teaching practices— not exclusively HPE, doing so presents unique challenges in this sensitive area that “can be a fulfilling and also challenging responsibility” (OME, 2015, p. 14). The expectations for teachers in this subject area are ample considering the sensitive nature of the topics present in the curriculum. The way in which teachers interpret and present the curriculum is often largely scrutinized and puts pressure on them both personally and professionally.

2.4.1 Teacher stereotypes

The teachers charged with teaching sexual health topics to elementary students often risk facing backlash from parents and the greater community that could impact their lives (Bickmore, 1999). Research indicates that, “whether the designated teacher was occupationally responsible
for sex education, several factors mitigated against teacher involvement” (Morgan, 2000, p. 110). Furthermore, teachers are not praised for teaching potentially embarrassing and uncomfortable material, rather they often faced discipline, or firing for teaching material not perceived as relevant to their subject areas (Morgan, 2000). These conflicts are still present today.

Bickmore (1999) argues that “Elementary teachers have the capacity to help children learn how to share public space with people similar to, and different from, themselves” (p. 15). However, these topics are present unsafe terrain for teachers even when explicitly stated in the curriculum (Bickmore, 1999; Garner, 1996; Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere, 1998). Research shows that teachers express anxiety around teaching these sensitive topics due to a fear of being criticised if their own values show (Allred, David, Smith, 2003). Until the 2015 revision of the HPE curriculum many relevant and emerging sexual health topics were not explicitly stated in the curriculum so “teachers who wish to teaching inclusivity “are in a terrible bind” they can either ignore children’s often dangerous misinformation, or step in and address it and be censured” (Giese, 1998). This sentiment appears to be shared by teachers in other topics of sexual health as well. The apparent reality of elementary classrooms and the students, in terms of the presence of sexual speech and actions, may be troublesome to some. However, as Irvine (2002) expands, “the pragmatic educator(s) knew that adults might be shocked by such questions, but, they insisted the shock is of reality and the teacher must prepare himself to deal with it” (p. 5). Unfortunately, due to several factors such as, students’ perceived prior knowledge, immaturity, or fear of parental objections, teachers often censor classroom materials and activities that limit student’s democratic foundations, such as free expression and access to knowledge (Bickmore, 1999). An example given by Khayatt (1997) as cited in Bickmore (1999):
It is that, often teachers who make independent choices to raise the matter of homosexuality are presumed to be homosexual and thereby at risk of job loss: where official guidelines require all teachers to cover sexual homosexual topics, they know the risk of dealing with such controversial material (p. 17).

The educators who teach sexual education to elementary students often are taking a personal and professional risk due to stereotypes previously addressed and others that have plagued this subject, and its teachers since its inception. Bickmore (1999) summarizes the beliefs of some of these teachers by saying, “discussing sexuality with elementary students is risky but necessary because of its very importance to their personal and political lives” (p. 18).

2.4.2 Teacher education

Sexual education, especially at the elementary level faces unique and fundamental challenges. Considering the importance and the sensitive nature of this subject “[teachers of sex education] should be seen as a specialism in itself, for which particular skills and expertise are required” (Buston, Wight, Hart & Scott, 2002, p. 69). Buston et al. (2002) elaborate and explain some of the findings of their research by saying that, in order to implement comprehensive sexual education in schools, teachers must be thoroughly trained to improve their confidence and knowledge, the concept that HPE teachers can teach anything must be eliminated. With the recent attention given to the conflict surrounding the revised HPE curriculum in Ontario the pressure for teachers to be prepared to teach these sensitive subjects is immense.

Research done by Scales & Kirby (1983) demonstrates teacher apprehensions in their own skills for implementing the curriculum in that, “[f]or many administrators, training that increases their basic skills in managing controversy would decrease their fear of opposition and increase their ability to deal with any opposition” (p. 325). This idea reiterates the fact that teachers are
acutely aware of the conflict around this subject, thus, they want to be as prepared as possible to
deal with the inevitable opposition. As Allred et al., (2003) found through interviews with
teachers “They feel underprepared for it [teaching sex education]. Being underprepared is
horrible, I think the biggest fear as a teacher in a situation like that is being asked a question that
you just don’t know how to answer” (p. 90). With many opportunities for educators to gain
additional certifications, little is readily available to them to prepare for teaching arguably the
most controversial subject. Scales & Kirby note that while HPE educators, administrators and
other institutions would benefit from training they rarely have these opportunities. Failure to
properly educate our educators will likely lead to further conflict and struggles in teaching and
implementing this sensitive subject area.

2.4.3 Teacher responsibilities

The educators that teach sex education have a unique and significant responsibility to the
students, parents and community. Research conducted by Weaver, Byers, Sears, Cohen &
Randall (2002) found that “Canadian parents believe that the SHE of their children should be a
shared responsibility between parents and schools” (p. 29). It appears to be generally accepted
that teachers have an influential role in children and in turn, the community’s life. As such, there
is an immense responsibility placed on them.

Their critical, but tough role in teaching this sensitive curriculum means “teachers, health
professionals and parents should be clear about defining what they are talking about. They
should also pursue sexual health education for themselves to ensure that teens are getting correct
information” (Frappier et al., 2008, p. 29). The powerful responsibilities teachers have in this
area are not often explored when discussing challenges in implementing revised HPE
curriculum. Interestingly, Infantry (1998) astutely observes that “although teachers often are not
given much life to teach about sexuality, they’re certainly held responsible once sex education ‘fails’ to alleviate problems such as the spread of AIDS”. This responsibility can be daunting, but offers the opportunity to make a meaningful and lasting impact on students and society.

2.5 Sexual Health Education in Society Today

At the fundamental level of sexual education there are pervasive disagreements, making it one of the most contentious areas of the curriculum (Halstead & Reiss, 2003). The conflicts surrounding sexual education remain steadfast today. Schools and districts are struggling to implement the revised 2015 Ontario HPE curriculum in elementary schools currently.

Corngold (2013) echoes previous sentiments in asserting that there is “perhaps no other part of the school curriculum [that] generate(s) as much controversy on such a consistent basis as sex education” (p. 439). Through his research he has identified several key factors that explain the contentious climate we are in now for sexual health education. Firstly, “policymakers, educators, parents, and other concerned citizens maintain different ideas about, and exhibit different levels of understanding of, human sexuality- and undeniably vast and complex subject” (p. 439). The second point being that “they hold differing views on how participation in a variety of classroom activities (for example, lectures, group discussions, life skills, kind and demonstrations, and so on) and exposure to a more or less expansive range of information are liable to impact children's nascent and sexual attitudes and behaviour” (p. 439). The final point is, “yet it is their adherence to fundamentally divergent concepts of sexual mortality, above all, that engenders impassioned debate in this area” (p. 439). McKay, Byers, Voyer, Humphreys & Markham, (2014) found similar results in that;

The development and implementation of high-quality broadly based SHE programs for use can be impacted by several factors. Perceived parental support for SHE in the schools
is one such factor. Although several surveys, conducted in different parts of Canada, have indicated strong support for SHE in schools among parents uncertainty about parents opinions and attitudes towards school-based sexual health education can be an obstacle to the implementation and delivery of sexual health curricula in Canadian schools (p. 159).

An example of this from Frappier et al., (2008) is that the proposed 2010 elementary revision of the HPE curriculum was withdrawn after backlash from parents and communities. Further research by McCall et al., (2004) supporting comprehensive sexual education asserts, “research consistently indicates that positive sexual health outcomes are most likely to occur when sexual health education effectively integrate knowledge, motivation, skill building opportunities, and environmental support for sexual health” (p. 596).

In order to develop and deliver a comprehensive sex education curriculum in Ontario for the present and future we must acknowledge and explore the issues that are preventing this present day. Allred & David (2007) summarize the essence of the issues in implementing sex education today by challenging some of the common myths by saying, “the injunction to get real represents an assertion that sex is everyday and all around, and that ignoring it won’t make it go away” (p. 15).

2.6 Support for Sexual Health Education in Schools

Although the implementation of sex education in schools has been plagued by controversy, “volatile sex education conflicts cannot be wholly explained as a result of polarised views...Most Americans claim to support comprehensive sexual education” (Irvine, 2002, p. 2). Like in the United States, survey research in Canada consistently shows that parents want their children to receive sexual health education in school (Langille, Langille, Beazley & Doncaster, 1996). The problem appears to go beyond a yes or no consensus when distinguishing opinions over whether
sexual education should be taught in schools. Rather it points to discrepancies in what content should be taught, at what age, and how, which fuels the ongoing debates (Corngold, 2013). Perhaps these fundamental differences are more complex than previously thought.

Research by McKay, Pietrusiak, Holoway (1998) surveyed 6800 parents in Southern Ontario and found that “95% of parents strongly agreed or agreed that SHE should be provided in the school system” (p. 160). Further, they found that “82% of parents were also supportive of a developmental approach to SHE that started in primary grades and continued through high school” (p. 160). Later, research by McKay et al., (2014), begins to identify and address some of the complex factors that contribute to the difficulty implementing sexual education in Ontario at this time. They administered surveys with respondents answering several questions on a scale of 1-10. In this research they found that an almost equal number of parents supported SHE in schools at 94%. (McKay, et al., p. 161). However, a finding that was not thoroughly explored was that of this vast majority supporting SHE, only 37% felt it should start in elementary school. (p. 161). While the initial figure of 94% presents an idea that does not appear to coincide with the controversy, this significantly lower figure does. The problems then, are not only about the topics addressed, but at what age they are introduced.

Although there appears to be widespread support for sexual education in schools, these figures mask disagreement about the nature, aims, content, and methods of sexual education (Halstead & Reiss, 2003). It has been largely accepted that “some people have religious beliefs about sex and others do not.. [and] people occupy different positions on a continuum”, and these factors play a significant role in the contentious nature of sexual education today (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, p. 15). But an emerging topic when you look at the findings critically, is that of age appropriateness, which will be discussed later. This factor, like all the others, does not stand-
alone. It is entwined in the beliefs that people hold based on their position in society (culturally, socioeconomically etc.). To gain a more thorough understanding we must explore the discrepancies that present themselves.

### 2.7 Emerging Trends and Challenges in Sexual Health Education

Sex education in schools has been widely debated and examined. As modern society shifts and changes so do the issues surrounding sensitive topics. To be able to adapt with these changes we first must be aware of them, and be willing to explore even the most difficult issues. I have identified three emerging barriers for implementing sex education in Canada today.

#### 2.7.1 ‘Romanticism of childhood’

One of the primary arguments against sex education in elementary schools is the concept of the *romanticism of childhood*. The idea of the “The romantic child is our modern image of naturally asexual, pure childhood that is at the heart of century long conflicts over sex education” (Higonnet, 1999, p. 13). The pervasive assumption that children are too immature and impressionable for sexual health information, and the role of adults in keeping this information from children has historical roots (Adams, 1997). Jenks (2005) quotes Locke’s explanation that “children are thought to be innocent, not innately, but like halfwits, as a consequence of their lack of social experience.” (p. 124). Therefore, we must protect the inexperienced children from content and experiences in society that corrupt them (Jenks, 2005).

The idea that children are innocent, isolated beings that must be sheltered from the world is a concept that is losing force, as adult content is permeating society in ways it never has before. Research has found that “there is an increased sophistication in the sexual knowledge of children and young people, with television in particular making accessible to children the secret the adult is to keep to themselves” (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, p. 19). Furthermore, according to Halstead &
Reiss, in society today children are encouraged to present themselves as sexual beings at very young and arguably more vulnerable age. Allred & David (2007) argue the risks associated with the vulnerability of children by saying “the idea of childhood sexual innocence inhibits progress of change regarding some of the oppressive aspects of adult–child relations in Western culture” (p. 3). There is a “double edged nature of childhood sexual innocence in creating conditions for children’s vulnerability in abuse, and attach penalty to those children seen as sexually aware who forfeit their *innocence*” (Kitzinger, 1988, p. 3). This issue is too complex to examine so briefly. However, it introduces a number of disturbing trends and concerns that children and society are facing today. Irvine (2002) summarizes many of the arguments surrounding this controversial issue by saying that “the phantasm of the innocent child being dangerously corrupted by sexual talk provokes controversy. Even those early sex education activists invoke the romantic child to justify their efforts” (p. 13). This call to protect the *romantic child* is arguably one both sides can take, simply with two different perspectives on the best way to do so.

### 2.7.2 Cultural and religious diversity in schools

Canada’s cultural and socioeconomic demographic has undergone a number of significant shifts in recent decades. Thomson (1994) explores this emerging issue in education by exploring the methods in which society deals with the challenge of sex education is inevitably culturally specific. As such, “the growth of ethnic diversity in western societies since the early 1950’s has also increased the diversity of sexual values and behaviours, as well as the possibility of misunderstanding and lack of trust” (Mahud, 1998, p. 130). Mahud (1998), elaborates in saying that “different religions uphold widely differing sexual values, and there is rarely consensus of values even within a single religious tradition (to say nothing of consistency between teaching and practice)” (p. 121). Anytime sensitive topics and terms such as, culture and religion are
brought into a debate the discourse becomes increasingly heated. However, in a topic as sensitive and crucial as sexual education we must work around these sensitive issues in a respectful and meaningful manner to get a better understanding of the issues, and to co-create solutions. At the conclusion of McKay et al., (2014), they suggest that “given the extensive and growing ethnocultural diversity in Ontario and in other parts of Canada, future research should examine parental opinions and attitudes towards SHE in schools with a specific focus on ethnicity, religious affiliation, country of birth and origin, as well as other salient demographic factors” (p. 166). I assert that one of the other salient demographic factors needs to relate to socioeconomic status, as there seem to be socioeconomic issues that need to be explored to be able to reach a greater understanding. We cannot ignore the clear need for such research simply because it is tedious and sensitive.

2.7.3 Sexual health education in elementary schools

As was mentioned earlier in this review of literature, the majority of Canadians, 94% express support for HPE in schools (McKay et al., 2014, p. 161). However, this number drops dramatically to 37% when asked if it should start in elementary school (McKay et al., p. 161). These statistics point to a powerful demand for further research in this area. “Sex education curricula are generally intended to provide students with background knowledge and to increase capacity to make responsible decisions” (Bickmore, 1999, p. 18). Arguably, giving children the opportunity to explore these issues (that are increasingly present in society) from a young age, in a safe classroom setting meets the need to educate the whole child.

2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, literature was reviewed that explored the common topics and barriers that have plagued sexual education implementation since its introduction. Although much has been
written on this topic, the actual research is limited. Furthermore, there is no consensus on the areas that have been discussed. The contentious topics of the past are still echoed today in the discourse that permeates society. With the current and emerging trends, research must shift towards addressing these issues, to try to make comprehensive implementation possible in our schools today.
Chapter 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction to the Chapter

The disruption that has occurred in a number of schools since the announcement and implementation of the revised Ontario 2015 Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum illustrates the complex and sensitive nature of this curriculum topic. This research study focused on identifying the challenges that some diverse schools and their classroom teachers have had in the implementation of the revised Ontario 2015 Health and Physical Education curriculum.

The following chapter will discuss the research methodology used in this research study, and the rationale for these decisions. I begin by describing the approach and procedures, followed by exploring the data collection instruments. I then outline participant data such as, sampling criteria, sampling procedures and information on the participants. Data analysis procedures are discussed and ethical considerations for this study are reviewed. The possible methodological limitations and strengths are addressed and examined in relation to the study and its’ objectives. Chapter 3 concludes by providing an overview of the chapter and establishing what will be covered in the subsequent chapters.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

I hoped to facilitate and open a meaningful dialogue about this emerging topic through qualitative research, with multiple case studies that utilized semi-structured interviews of two elementary school teachers for data collection. Included in this research study is a review of literature conducted prior to commencing my research. For this I reviewed relevant, academic literature and existing research to best position myself for conducting this research study.

The nature of this topic and my research objectives indicates a need for using qualitative research to explore this dynamic and sensitive topic. John Creswell (2013), describes qualitative
research as the, “process of research as flowing from philosophical assumptions, to interpretative lens, and on to the procedures involved in studying social or human problems” (p. 44). It is precisely the emphasis on the “social or human problems” (John Cresswell, 2013, p. 44), which makes qualitative research best suited for this research study.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

For this research study I conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews with two participating teachers. The rationale for using semi-structured interviews is that they allow for the inclusion and consideration of participants lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). This works well with my stated objectives and beliefs that the teachers’ lived experience and knowledge is fundamentally important to this research topic. Creating an environment in which the participants feel they are valued as co-researchers is essential to my research. The semi-structured interview method is an effective way of accomplishing this as it allows the researcher/interviewer the opportunity to conduct the interview in a way that focuses on their research and questions, while still giving the participant the ability to elaborate or change the direction of the interview as needed (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, selecting a case study approach further fosters the desired research environment by “developing an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of particular phenomena in its ‘real life’ context” (Simons, 2009, p. 21).

Prior to our interviews the teachers were provided with the identical interview questions for them to familiarize themselves with. The questions were open ended, designed to elicit meaningful and relevant answers. The interviews were one-on-one with a duration of approximately sixty minutes. They were conducted at a time and place that was appropriate for the research and procedures, while being as convenient as possible for the participants. During
the interviews I used two recording devices to ensure accuracy, and troubleshoot for potential technological errors.

3.3 Participants

Establishing participants for any study is of particular importance. Subject selection in qualitative research is purposeful; participants are selected whom can best inform the research questions and enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study (Kuper, Lingard & Levinson, 2008; Creswell, 2009). This purposeful selection is particularly appropriate and necessary when discussing a sensitive and specific topic, such as the implementation challenges of the revised 2015 Ontario HPE curriculum in some diverse schools in the GTA. The methodological decisions on participant selection will be examined next.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The criteria I used to select teacher participants was as follows:

1. Teachers will have experienced some disruption or issue regarding the implementation of the revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum in the last 12 months, so they are able to contribute to the discussion I hope to facilitate on this topic.

2. Teachers will have been working in elementary school classrooms (preferably the same school) for at least 2 years, so they are able to compare their experiences with the previous HPE curriculum, and the revised release in 2015.

3. The teachers must presently work at a school that is considered ‘diverse’- “the state of having people who are different races or who have different cultures in a group or organization” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). This is to ensure that my research is exploring the gaps identified in previous research regarding issues of diversity in sexual education.
4. The teachers will presently (and at least one year previously) have taught in a public school in the Greater Toronto Area, in a primary or junior classroom. To comprehensively explore this issue under the given parameters, maintaining some geographical consistency is required.

5. Teachers must be willing to discuss the potentially sensitive nature of these topics in a professional and meaningful way. There are potentially many teachers who would be meet the previous 4 criteria, but would be uncomfortable with discussing this sensitive topic. To thoroughly address the purpose of this research study the teachers interviewed must be willing and able to share into their personal and professional experiences to facilitate meaningful research on this topic.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

Recruitment of participants was done in a purposeful manner that considers the sampling criteria previously mentioned. “In qualitative research sample selection has a profound effect on the ultimate quality of research” (Coyne, 1997, p. 623). Considering the sensitive and topical nature of this research study the sampling procedures and thus participants must be carefully selected.

Based on the parameters of this study I primarily utilized purposeful sampling, with convenience sampling being a secondary tool. Purposeful sampling was the dominant method, as the participants must meet specific criteria. However, based on the small scale nature of this research study convenience sampling was additionally used for three main reasons. The first being that in order to thoroughly examine this research topic under the given parameters, it is most effective to focus on a specific area thoroughly, rather than attempting to examine a larger area superficially. The second reason being that, to be able to conduct the interviews in person,
as I felt that it would be the most beneficial, I had to be able to meet with the participants at their convenience, so staying in a central location was necessary. A final reason, while not necessarily related to convenience, is that the focus of this research is looking at diverse school populations in the GTA. Therefore selecting participants from the GTA was critical to meet this research goal.

I located my participants through a combination of previously established connections (for example, I attended a multi school staff meeting on the implementation of the revised HPE curriculum in York Region District School Board, focusing specifically on diverse schools and the issues they are facing) and developing new ones through networking.

3.3.3 Participant biographies

This section is dedicated to the bios of the participants of this research study. It will outline their background, insight and expertise on this subject matter. The participant bios will appear in the order in which the interviews took place, which were conducted in no particular order. It is critical to note that any identifying personal information has been changed to ensure anonymity; as such pseudonyms have been created for each participant. Both participants are elementary classroom teachers in school boards in the Greater Toronto Area.

The first participant Lindsey has been a teacher for 15 years and has been with her current board since 2003. She has also been at her current school since 2007. Her teaching experiences have included Primary, Junior and Intermediate grades, and the year of the updated HPE curriculum implementation she was teaching grade 4 for approximately the sixth time.

Lindsey believes that it is critical that students have the opportunity to learn about the topics presented in the HPE curriculum as “this is [what is] happening” in the students’ lives and surroundings.
The second participant Martha has been a teacher for twenty years, the last seventeen in her current board. She has been a Health and Physical Education teacher for 10 years and is presently the HPE teacher for Kindergarten to Grade 5 at her school.

Her teaching philosophy reflects her passion for well-being and strives to be a role model for healthy living for her students. Promoting “life long living skills...as your foundation” and “teaching kids about wellbeing whether it’s mental health or physical health” are cornerstones of her beliefs and she notes are reflected in the HPE curriculum.

3.4 Data Analysis

To purposefully and thoroughly analyse the data, I began by transcribing the individual interviews. From these transcriptions I individually coded using my research questions as an interpretive tool. Coding is “a method that enables you to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or ‘families’ because they share some characteristic” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 8). Initially, I identified codes within each set of data. Next, codes have been grouped into categories. As a next step, themes were found by grouping categories of data. Following this I considered the categories and themes simultaneously and synthesized the emergent themes across the two interview data. Finally, I examined the themes derived and discussed the meanings and implications for these findings in relation to existing research previously established. This process of multilevel coding and deriving themes is required in qualitative research, as this inquiry method “demands meticulous attention to language and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and meanings of human experience” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 10). At this point I considered any null data and discussed the implications and understandings from these points.
3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

The ethical review procedures used for this study are outlined by the Master of Teaching program guidelines. According to the University of Toronto *Guidelines and practices manual for research involving human subjects* there are a multitude of “fundamental principles of research ethics [that] transcend disciplines and methodologies” (Committee on Human Subjects in Research, 2007, p. 9). My research and ethical procedures accounted for these principles and others in various meaningful ways. The participants were asked to sign a consent letter (Appendix A), which provided their consent to be interviewed as well as audio recorded. This consent letter provided an overview of the study, addressed possible ethical implications, and specifies expectations of participation, which is one forty-five to sixty minute semi-structured interview.

A guiding principle of this research study was the “The voluntary and knowing agreement of the subject to participate in the research is a cornerstone of modern research ethics” (Committee on Human Subjects in Research, 2007, p. 9). Prior to commencing the interview process, I distributed and reviewed a consent letter that explains pertinent information about the research study with the participants (see Appendix A). Each participant signed the informed consent letter preceding the interview.

Research studies demand, “Respect for human dignity [which] entails that research must be respectful of individuals and their physical, psychological, social and cultural well being” (Committee on Human Subjects in Research, 2007, p. 9). Due to the potentially sensitive or uncomfortable nature of this topic, I reminded the participants throughout the interview of their right to refrain from answering any questions that they did not feel comfortable with and their right to withdraw at any time.
During research studies “Protecting subjects’ privacy and confidentiality are fundamental to ensuring their dignity” (Committee on Human Subjects in Research, 2007, p. 9). As the Master of Teaching program guidelines dictate a number of measures will be taken to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym that will be used throughout the entire research study. Additionally, the identity or identifying indicators related to the participants’ schools, or students has been excluded. Further, the data collected (audio recordings) has been stored in a password-protected device and will be destroyed after five years.

Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden, (2001), noted that “ethical issues are present in any kind of research” (p. 93). While there are risks associated in participating in this study, they are minimal and various techniques were taken to minimize the risks. Due to the nature of qualitative research, and the topic of sexual education in elementary schools some of the questions might have elicited emotional responses or involve controversial opinions. However, steps to ensure privacy and respect for human dignity have been taken that will decrease these potential risks.

The potential issues involving the power differential are minimal based on my position as a graduate student researcher (interviewer), and established, professional educators (interviewees).

Lastly, I provided participants with a copy of their transcript to ensure they will have the opportunity to review the transcripts and to clarify or retract any statements before I conduct data analysis. I accomplished this by communicating with each participant individually prior to coding the data and sending them a complete copy of the transcript for their review.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

As with all research, there are limitations and strengths to this study. One of the benefits to qualitative research is simultaneously one of the greatest limitations, “Qualitative research
studies can provide you with details about human behaviour, emotion, and personality characteristics that quantitative studies cannot match” (Madrigal & McClain, 2012).

The role of the researcher in qualitative studies presents other possible limitations, specifically, around the potential for bias. This role, as both the researcher and interpreter of the findings may result in some questions involving bias (Merriam, 2002). Interestingly though, rather than ignoring or disregarding qualitative research, Merriam (2002), suggests monitoring the influencing factors, and the potential ways they impact the data, data collection and interpretation. Another limitation regarding bias is that of the potential relationship between researcher and participant (Carr, 1994). In some qualitative research studies issues stemming from prolonged interaction, and integration could result in researchers becoming too involved with the participants and their lives (Carr, 1994). Although this is at an extreme end of the spectrum for bias it is critical to recognize it as a possibility, and handle it accordingly. Since my interaction with each participant was relatively short, and simply involved basic communication leading up to the interview (for examples, setting up a time and location), a 45 min to 1 hour long interview, and basic follow up communication (for example, sending the transcript), the risk for this kind of issue or bias emerging was limited.

Due to the nature of this study I was only able to collect data from two teachers, meaning the sample size is not large enough to be able to accurately generalize the findings (Jackson II, Drummond & Camara, 2007).

Conversely, due to the in-depth nature of these studies, qualitative research commonly comprises a small, selective sample (Carr, 1994). Allowing this research to explored the invaluable lived experiences and knowledge classroom teachers have on this topic in a meaningful way, unique to qualitative research. This approach “focuses on methods and
techniques of investigation that take into account the study population’s history, culture, interactive activities and emotional lives” (Berg & Lune, 2014, p. 197). These fundamental aspects of qualitative research lend well to the objectives of this research study.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I explained the research methodology I utilized in this research study. I introduced the research approach and procedure I used, and discussed the rationale and significance of using quantitative research in this study. I detailed the instruments of data collection, specifying semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data, and addressed the reasons for this. I then established the participants of the study, including the sampling criteria and procedures used to obtain participants, and brief participant biographies. Next, I discussed the procedure of analyzing data, by first reviewing each interview individually and in depth, then coding for categories and synthesizing emerging themes. Following this, I addressed the ethical review procedures and discussed considerations for minimizing potential obstacles. Finally, I examined methodological limitations and illustrated the methodological strengths of this research study. In the following chapter I will discuss the findings of the research study.
Chapter 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter reports on the findings that emerged through the analysis of the two semi-structured interviews that were conducted for this research study. The purpose of this study was to identify the challenges that some diverse schools and their classroom teachers face in the implementation of the revised Ontario 2015 Health and Physical Education curriculum. The findings have been interpreted and organized into five main themes: 1) Community demographics and influence; 2) Parent response to the implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum; 3) Teacher feelings and experiences with the initial implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum; 4) Impact of implementation of revised 2015 HPE curriculum on teaching practices; and 5) Revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum content concerns. Each of these main themes has a number of associated sub-themes that contribute depth to the research findings. The chapter will include an analysis and discussion of the emergent themes, consideration of the themes significance in view of existing literature, and will conclude with a summary of the findings and overview of the final chapter.

4.1 Revised Ontario 2015 HPE Curriculum Content Concerns

Challenges involving the content of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum document were significant for both participants. The format of the document itself was problematic as Martha noted, since parents who were unfamiliar with curriculum documents were reading it without the knowledge of how to do so. The topics covered within the curriculum contributed significantly to the challenges, according Lindsey and Martha. For both of the participants the part of the curriculum that caused the most opposition was the ‘Teacher Prompt’ portion. The content concerns were an undeniable challenge for both Lindsey and Martha in implementing the revised
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2015 HPE curriculum in their diverse schools. Issues with content has been a constant feature of SHE curriculum from its’ inception. Halstead & Reiss (2003) summarize these issues by asserting “the biggest problem facing sex educators today is the sheer diversity of sexual values that exist in our society” (p. 5).

4.1.1 HPE Curriculum Document Format and Parent Readability

When the revised 2015 HPE curriculum was released, many parents who were unfamiliar with how curriculum documents are formatted read it, which in turn resulted in confusion and alarm. Martha illustrated this with an example from the “grade three [curriculum] if it’s in italics it doesn’t need to be taught, but in grade six it needs to be mentioned”. This is information that teachers have and can use their professional judgement to decide what is appropriate for their class and what is not. Unfortunately, the parents that are reading this document do not understand the intricacies of the format, which results in misunderstandings that contribute to the challenges of implementation. At this point, there is no empirical research that discusses the format of the SHE curriculum document in terms of parent readability.

4.1.1.1 ‘Teacher prompts’. According to both participants, the ‘teacher prompt’ sections within the revised 2015 HPE curriculum have been recurring areas of contention. Martha noted that the issue is similar to that of the formatting misunderstandings in that parents do not realize the ‘teacher prompts’ are “not a [curriculum] expectation”. Martha gives an example of a misunderstanding comes from the grade six curriculum where a ‘teacher prompt’ states “exploring one’s body by touching or masturbating is something that many people do and find pleasurable” (OME, 2015, p. 175). In this one excerpt which was mentioned by both participants, two highly contentious topics were mentioned, masturbation and sexual pleasure.
As Martha mentioned, many misinformed parents and community members believe that discussing these topics are part of the curricular expectations and will definitely be explored in class. Furthermore, this relates to the issues Martha mentioned previously about confusion as to what ‘demonstrate an understanding’ truly means. Lindsey shared her experiences with trouble surrounding ‘teacher prompts’ through an example from the grade three curriculum, “we call come from different families…some have two mothers or two fathers” (OME, 2015, p. 124). In this instance Lindsey said the issues come from the fact that the parents “don’t want to teach their children that and they think we’re going to teach their children that”. Whereas both Lindsey and Martha noted that what they taught reflected their classroom realities. For Lindsey, this means that “if someone did have two moms then yes they would definitely be learning about that, so they can respect that child…but there’s not two moms in my class so I wouldn’t say that to them.” As Martha noted in her interview, topics of inclusion are addressed starting in September, it is not limited to the two weeks they discuss the SHE curriculum. With the unique nature of the ‘teacher prompt’ section prior empirical research does not exist in this area.

4.1.2 Contentious topics in the 2015 revised Ontario HPE Curriculum

Lindsey and Martha both identified a number of specific curriculum topics and objectives that they understood to be the most contentious with parents and community members. They both identified that topics such as homosexuality, homophobia, gender identity, and gender expression were consistently the ones parents wanted their children exempt from, on religious grounds. Lindsey and Martha both noted though, that students are not to be withdrawn from those topics as they are protected under the Ontario Human Rights Code. However, both participants mentioned that parents removed them from these classes without permission. In many jurisdictions where LGBTQ rights and topics are not mandatory topics, the teachers that do
mention them are “targeted [for] even allowing children to read about the existence of homosexual people” (EGALE; Garner 1996). For Lindsey, the opposition to topics in the curriculum reached beyond LGBTQ topics. When asked about other factors that contributed to the challenges she said that parents and the community did not want students learning the “names of body parts or anything with reproduction or relationships because they’re very clear on not having relationships until they’re married” this includes the term sex and anything to do with “sexual pleasure”. From her understanding, “anything that [goes] against the teachings of the Qu’ran” are the topics that cause the most issue with the parents and the community.

4.2 Community Demographics and Influence

Both of the participants identified the surrounding community as a substantial challenge to the implementation of the new curriculum. This aligns with Halstead & Reiss’s (2003) findings that “often the diversity…result[s] in serious disagreement and conflict between different sectors of society (p. 22). Although the participants’ schools are in different parts of the Greater Toronto Area, the communities shared the commonality of having a diverse student and community population, which aligns with the selection criteria that required the participants’ student population to be diverse. Due to the significant role the community’s demographics had, and the community’s influence on the challenges implementing the curriculum, the participants identified specific aspects that they felt contributed the most to the challenges faced.

4.2.1 Community members’ religious and cultural identity

The topic of religion and cultural identity were of particular importance for both of the participants. Despite both participants’ schools being considered diverse, they were diverse in different ways. When asked to describe the community that their schools are in Lindsey noted that at her school the students and community members were “Ahmadiyya Muslim, the
community is always [growing, with] more of them coming in at anytime throughout the year”. Conversely, Martha described her school as “very multicultural, but very diverse at the same time”. She elaborated by saying that “it’s mostly Arabic, Asian, a lot of students from Pakistan, Jamaica, there’s a couple kids that were born and raised in Canada that have Caucasian parents”. The religious and cultural identity of the community came to the forefront for both of my participants as the majority of the objections to the curriculum were rooted in religious beliefs according to the parents and the community.

For Lindsey, the fact that her school was largely from the same religion and culture caused a unique set of challenges. She articulated this by saying that “it’s not like another school where it might be one or two people that are being pulled out because of religion…the whole community is coming from the Mosque and they’re all against [it], or most of them are against it.” As a result of the community’s connectedness there was “community support for them [the students] to be at home. They might have had someone even at the Mosque watch a group of students if they didn’t have someone [at home]”. Even months after the implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum when asked about the future Lindsey is not hopeful as she believes that “you can’t do much with a religion that won’t accept it.”

For Martha the multicultural nature of her school saw opposition coming from the Christian and Muslim communities. In her experience “the parents that did call were more Christian, Christianity based.” Martha noted though that after speaking with these parents they were more comfortable with the curriculum. The Muslim community in her school area still opposed but the way they handled their opposition was different than her experiences with the Christian parents and community, and will be discussed in the upcoming section of this paper.
4.2.2 Community influence on the implementation of the revised Ontario 2015 HPE Curriculum in diverse schools

Both participants identified the community as having an integral role in the challenges the schools and teachers faced with the revised 2015 HPE curriculum. An interesting finding was that they both discussed in detail the “influence” the community had on the challenges and situation overall. Irvine (2002) outlined the ways that the community influences its’ members either by “persuad[ing] the indifferent or reluctant by scaring or outraging them” or “because they understand the codes by which their actions will be interpreted by others” (p. 8).

The influence of Lindsey’s surrounding community was deeply connected with the Mosque and the tight bonds the members had. As most of the students, their families, and other community members shared the same place of worship, cultural identity and religion the influence the community had was powerful as illustrated in the previous section discussing the religious and cultural identity of the community members.

Martha illustrated the influence the Muslim community had within itself in her school community by describing “this form letter like ‘welcome to Canada, you’re Arabic, you’re Muslim, this is what you need to tell your school’”. When asked to elaborate on this and other examples she had given she hesitantly used the term ‘propaganda’ to express what she felt was happening within the community. One of the examples she gave to illustrate this point when several Syrian refugee students arrived, “they wanted to be exempt from the teaching of the Human Development [component] because of the word hygiene, but not the word penis or vagina”. For her this described the power the religious community had on its’ own members and the sentiment echoes Lindsey’s experiences too.
4.3 Parent Response to the Implementation of the Revised Ontario 2015 HPE Curriculum in Diverse Schools

The reaction from parents to the implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum was a challenge for both of the participants. A poll of Ontario parents conducted in May 2016 found that “as many as one in six Ontario parents remains so unhappy with the province’s new sex education curriculum that they have either pulled their children from class or considered it” (Csanady, 2016). When the curriculum was implemented in classrooms parents in both of the participant’s communities responded powerfully.

4.3.1 Student withdrawal

When asked about the disruption to the school and the classroom when it was time to implement the curriculum Lindsey stated that the “issues began when parents had to give consent.” Despite efforts made by the teachers, schools and boards Lindsey’s class and school faced “mass withdrawals” and the parents were “happy to withdraw them” according to Lindsey. The issue of mass withdrawal was present for Martha too. However, when the time came Martha stated that few parents actually removed their children from her classes (the reasons will be discussed later on in this chapter). Due to Martha’s role, she attended and facilitated a meeting with parents and community members from her school and three neighbouring schools in hopes of minimizing the challenges and disruption when the implementation happened. During this meeting Martha said she was “attacked by some of the other parents, so there were threats and hostility”. These other schools ultimately encountered mass student withdrawal, similar to that of Lindsey’s school. Martha added that during the times that parents and community members had withdrawn their children from school they were “boycotting or striking” and if a parent had
unknowingly sent their child to school during that time “they felt bad that they [had] sent their child to school”.

4.3.1.1 Parental explanation for student withdrawal. Although both participants identified religion as one of the key factors for student withdrawal, Lindsey explained that the challenges in implementing the revised 2015 HPE curriculum in diverse schools is more complex than religion alone. Lindsey’s experiences pointed to three main oppositional parent responses to the curriculum at her school. The first is grounded in religion, which is that the Qu’ran will not allow their children to learn “these things”, so therefore the parents would not allow it. The second was that the parents would “teach it themselves”. The third was related both to religion and the desire to teach it themselves, as many parents “didn’t want them to learn it [content of the curriculum] at such an early age. Irvine (2003), articulates the belief that children’s innocence needs to be preserved by not teaching them about topics of sexual health as the romanticism of childhood. She challenges this belief by introducing a reinvented childhood, where “children’s awareness about sexuality and refused to equate sexual innocence with ignorance” (Irvine, 2003, p. 14).

4.3.2 Misunderstandings and lack of trust between parents and the education system

Lindsey and Martha both found that misunderstandings about the curriculum and the pedagogy were significant challenges in their classrooms and schools. They found that misinformation was propagated through the communities without coming to the teachers or schools to clarify or openly discuss concerns. As Irvine (2003) points out “some people have not thought very much about [sex education] and have no idea what schools are teaching. Others might be religiously or politically predisposed toward one point of view but are confused about a particular program” (p. 7). These factors when combined with the community’s influence can
highly impact the way that parents perceive and respond to the SHE curriculum. Martha’s case was unique, as she found that due to her previously established relationships with her students’ parents, the disruption and withdrawal was limited due to the fact that they “know me and respect me and understand what I was doing and trust me”. This is an interesting finding as it suggests that building relationships with parents, especially in diverse communities, is crucial so that when sensitive issues such as this arise there are connections and trust in place to facilitate resolutions. She did acknowledge though that at the early stages of the introduction and announcement of the curriculum parents at her school engaged in the striking and boycotting that occurred at Lindsey’s school and a number of others throughout the GTA.

For the other schools that Martha was involved with the misunderstandings with parents impacted the classrooms substantially. She felt that much of the challenge implementing the curriculum comes from the fact that “some people are really influenced [by] someone’s misunderstandings”. As Martha noted, a significantly higher number of parents read the revised 2015 HPE curriculum document than any other curriculum documents. This is problematic in Martha’s opinion because although teachers know how to read and interpret the curriculum documents parents do not, and this contributed to the misunderstandings. An example of a considerable misunderstanding that came from a parents’ misinterpretation of a phrase in the curriculum is based on the terminology “demonstrate an understanding”. Parents believed that “demonstrate an understanding…meant being in front of the class and demonstrate[ing]” a concept in an explicit way. Martha pointed out that this was not something educators would “even clue into” because it was “throughout the Ministry curriculum, not just the Health [and Physical Education] curriculum”. She attributed the miscommunications to the fact that many
parents were “listening to someone else rather than the teachers of the school” which was a recurring and problematic issue mentioned by both participants.

4.4 Teacher Feelings and Experiences with the Initial Implementation of the Revised Ontario 2015 HPE Curriculum

When asked to describe their comfort level teaching the previous and the revised HPE curriculum, both participants identified themselves as being “very comfortable”. Their positions were solidified when asked if “as an educator [they] believe the Human Development and Sexual Health (SHE) component should be part of the mandatory curriculum?”. Both Lindsey and Martha responded with a firm “yes” to this question. For Martha, she expressed that the revised 2015 HPE curriculum is “getting to be exactly what our students need in our current date of age”. Lindsey shared a similar sentiment in that she believes that “it was necessary to make the [curriculum] changes that are happening”. Although both participants expressed their comfort and support for the changes to the curriculum history indicates, “teachers [are] vilified for progressive educational practices” (Thomson, 1994, p. 47) and this appears to continue to exist in our society today and is a significant factor in the experiences that teachers have in implementing sensitive curricula.

4.4.1 Teacher beliefs on the content and pedagogy of the HPE curriculum

After each participant identified that they believed SHE should be part of the mandatory curriculum, they were asked at what age they believed SHE should begin, and what should be included. Both participants expressed their beliefs that knowing “the proper names of their body parts” should be what SHE begins with. Martha expanded on this by saying that “safety of the body and how you’re growing” should be included in the initial SHE education. In addition, both participants believe SHE should be included in primary grades. Lindsey believed that “six years
old is good. The curriculum now is for them to know the proper names of their body parts in grade one so I believe that’s the right time”. Martha concurred with Lindsey saying that it should begin in “grade one”, but went on to say that “even in Kindergarten” they should be talking about the previously mentioned aspects of SHE.

4.4.2 Resources and support for teachers in schools with the revised 2015 HPE curriculum implementation challenges

Both participants identified that their schools and boards had policies and resources available to teachers designed to help support them in teaching the revised 2015 HPE curriculum. As Scales & Kirby (1983) note, the implementation of SHE requires the “commitment of both administrators and program staff” (p. 323), which were key factors for both participants. Lindsey and Martha’s experiences and supports were distinct as their schools are in different GTA boards, but the supports shared similar characteristics.

Lindsey’s school began to address the upcoming curriculum implementation in March 2015, when her school and a neighbouring school had a joint staff meeting to discuss protocols, resources, supports, questions and concerns. At this meeting the teachers were informed by the Ministry of Education and their administration that if parents wanted to withdraw their students from classes the parents would need to complete a form and return it to the office prior to the lesson to try to alleviate some of the stress that was going to fall on them. The teachers were further instructed to only use Ophea curriculum resources to teach their lessons. The teaching practice implications will be discussed at a later point in this chapter. Overall Lindsey expressed that she was content with the resources and support her school and board provided to the teachers.
Similar to Lindsey’s experiences, Martha’s board had meetings and resources designed to support teachers in areas that were facing implementation challenges. Martha discussed one meeting that included parents, teachers and administrators that became a “forum” rather than a meeting and saw high levels of “hostility between some parents, teachers and principals in other schools”. She also attended a Ministry event in May of 2015, but said that after “[the support] was done”. Martha’s board also released lesson plans for teachers to utilize and Martha was “responsible for writing some of the lesson plans.” which gave her an interesting perspective on the resources and supports available.

4.4.2.1 Support from the board and administration. When asked if there was anything she believed could be done in the future to alleviate some of the challenges and conflicts for teachers in implementing sensitive curriculum Martha expressed some concerns. She said that she “thought we had support from the school board and from our administration, and then I think they all kind of pulled back”. She attributed this “pull back” of support to the fact that “he [administration] didn’t want to step on any toes, he didn’t want to have liability”. At a presentation made to “the Board of Trustees and to a bunch of Imams and the Board of Directors” she outlined an example of a lesson for the grade three curriculum on “visible and invisible differences [that] could be 4-6 weeks”. After this presentation, her board informed her that the lesson/unit was to be “two weeks tops” with “three lessons tops”. In addition to the perceived lack of support for teaching the curriculum she mentions that as of the interview date, the teachers had not heard any information about support or protocol for implementing the curriculum this year. She compared this to her experience when her “board did a huge step with it last year, and has done nothing this year”. Research done by Scales & Kirby (1983) discusses the role that administration has in preparing their educators and handling opposition for teaching
SHE. They believe that to support teachers, administration has to obtain training in managing opposition and controversy, but that they rarely receive this training (Scales & Kirby, 1983). These findings reflect the feelings that Martha had in regards to a perceived lack of administration and board support for teachers in diverse schools that are implementing the revised HPE curriculum.

At the time of the interview, Lindsey’s school and board had not addressed the implementation of the curriculum that year, but she did not express concerns about the board and/or administration. She shared that her board had teachers contact every parent to fill out an accommodation form for their child(ren) and that it was problematic and highly impacted her teaching practices. She stated that she would not do that procedure in upcoming years.

**4.5 Impact of the Implementation of the Revised Ontario 2015 HPE Curriculum on Teaching Practices**

Lindsey and Martha both expressed that the challenges in implementing the revised 2015 HPE curriculum influenced their teaching practices in significant ways. Both participants mentioned that as educators they “teach to their students” and that what they teach reflects, “what’s happening in [their] class”. However, due to the challenges associated with implementing this sensitive curriculum in diverse schools, their teaching practices had to change drastically. At the time of the study, little empirical research has been done on the impacts of SHE on teaching practices when a governing body has mandated the curriculum.

**4.5.1 Classroom and time management implications**

Both participants discussed how their classroom and time management were impacted by the implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum. For Lindsey, her preparation time was severely decreased as she was required to call each of her students parents and fill out an
accommodation form so their child could be exempt from the SHE curriculum. She noted that although she made the calls and discussed concerns with parents, when the time came for the curriculum to be taught the parents just removed their children, regardless of the whether or not the form had been completed. She illustrated this by saying that she “spent a lot of prep time calling parents, whereas now I’m not going to do that this year. It will have to be during another time to make phone calls, but not during prep time.”

The issue of preparation time was not relevant for Martha as she was not required by her board to make these phone calls and mentioned that after the initial upset, a relatively small number of parents contacted her about the curriculum. For Lindsey issues of time management extended beyond losing preparation time as she needed to change the times of her health classes to meet the needs of the students and community. With such a large number of her students being withdrawn (only 4 from a class of 32 stayed), she combined her class with another of the same grade for health. Additionally, they moved the health class times to after lunch or the end of the day “so that all the students can be withdrawn and not interrupt [by coming] in and out and [they can] just go home.

A similarity between participants’ experiences in regards to time management was that both boards designated the same two-week period to teach the SHE component of the curriculum. For Martha, the fact that she was given “less than two weeks” to teach the curriculum was a harsh contrast to the 4-6 weeks she usually spends on SHE units. This short timeframe was a topic of concern for both participants and they felt hindered their effectiveness as teachers. Research by Allred, David, Smith (2003) found that a lack of allotted time contributes to the ineffectiveness of the SHE curriculum. The practice of using pre-made lesson plans was a change for Lindsey and Martha, and although it helped them meet the time and
content requirements outlined by the board and their school administration it left both teachers feeling that their lessons were not as meaningful as they would have been without the limitations.

4.5.2 Parent requested accommodations and implemented accommodations

Throughout the interviews, Lindsey and Martha discussed some of the accommodations that were made by their schools and boards, and some of the accommodations parents and the communities requested. Martha’s board distributed informative pamphlets in various languages and held information nights for parents and community members. Lindsey’s administration had teachers contact each student’s family individually to discuss the curriculum and fill out accommodation forms. Both teachers made their lesson plans available to parents and Lindsey sent hers home with students prior to teaching the classes. Both participants’ boards and schools informed parents that their children could be withdrawn from the SHE classes, with the exception of any topic covered in the Ontario Human Rights Code (OHRC) as students are required to attend those – although in reality they did not. At Lindsey’s school the parents wanted space and supervision for students to go during their health classes. They urged the school to let the students go to the library and have staff monitor them for the duration of each health lesson. The school was not equipped to do this, based on the size of the library and availability of staff, so parents removed their children from the school premises during this time.

4.5.2.1 ‘Teachable moments’ and curriculum integration. For both participants the time constraints and changes, and the inability to use their own unit/lesson plans, and for Lindsey, the mass withdrawals impacted their teaching practices substantially. Martha articulated the results as a loss of “any teachable moments”. Rather than “talks, just open ended inquiry things it was just like ‘ok this is what you guys have to learn, close your books, move on’” and Martha believes influenced her teaching efficacy. She went on to say that she “[didn’t] have the
strong relationship she usually [has] with the kids” because she was unable to promote inquiry and open communication which are critical to have in these subject areas. For Lindsey the mass withdrawal meant she could not integrate SHE content into other curriculum areas which she believes was detrimental to her students overall learning. She also noted that she was unable to report on this area for report cards, which is a professional requirement. Regardless of the implications Lindsey and Martha both stated that even with the limitations and withdrawals the students learned and developed connections to the SHE curriculum content. Lindsey went on to say that even the students who were withdrawn will be exposed to it in some form as “these things are happening anyways...this is happening” in society.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter identified and discussed the themes that emerged from the data analysis of the participant interviews, and connected the findings to literature reviewed. The themes derived from the data are: community demographics and influence; parent response to the implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum; teacher feelings and experiences with the initial implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum; impact of implementation of revised 2015 HPE curriculum on teaching practices; and curriculum content concerns. The first three themes consider the experiences and influences of the community, parents, and teachers on the challenges and findings of the research topic. The fourth theme discusses the impact of the implementation challenges on teacher practices. The final theme examines the way the changes were integrated into the curriculum. Each of these themes contributes to the understanding of the challenges in implementing the revised 2015 HPE curriculum in diverse schools in significant ways.
Both participants described the community demographic and its’ influence as a powerful contributor to the challenges faced in the implementation. Although Lindsey and Martha’s schools were in different areas of the GTA, the communities shared similar demographic features. Characteristics such as religion and culture were defining features of these communities and were discussed in detail by each participant. Both participants articulated the dominating influence the community members had on the way that the HPE, specifically the HPE curriculum, was received and implemented in these areas. These findings point to a need for further research into the impact that community demographics influences the implementation of sensitive curriculum in schools.

Lindsey and Martha discussed the response that parents had to the implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum. Lindsey experienced protests and mass withdrawals of students from her class and the school in general. Martha experienced protests, but after consulting with her schools’ parents, she saw limited student withdrawal. Due to Martha’s role in her board she attended a meeting with three schools and her own where she experienced threats and outrage from parents at her neighbouring schools. With the two participants experiencing similarities and ultimately differences in the parents’ reaction to the implementation, there needs to be more research done to further explore the factors that contributed to this discrepancy.

The experiences and feelings that the participants described articulate the effect that the implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum had on some teachers in diverse areas. Due to the limitations of this research study, the participants’ responses cannot be generalized to all teachers. However they do provide insight into some of the challenges and emotions teachers faced in regards to this topic. Both Lindsey and Martha reported having support and resources from their respective boards, although Lindsey was content with the support she was given.
Whereas Martha described frustration with how the board and her school administration handled the challenges, leaving her feeling inadequately supported in a meaningful way. The contrasting feelings and experiences of the two participants illustrate a demand for more research to be completed in this area, in order to understand and support educators with the implementation of opposed curriculum in the future.

Lindsey and Martha both discussed the ways in which their teaching practices were impacted by the challenges in implementing the revised 2015 HPE curriculum in their diverse schools. Martha expressed that her teaching practices were most impacted by the lack of time and the way that her administration had her teach the lessons. She was limited to three lessons over a two-week period to teach the SHE component of the HPE curriculum, whereas she usually takes 4-6 weeks to do so. For Lindsay, the structure of her day was deeply impacted. She spent preparation time calling parents and filling out accommodation forms, she had to move the time of health classes to correspond to lunch or the end of the day to try to mitigate the disruptions of the mass student withdrawals. One of the areas that was most impacted for both participants was that of ‘teachable moments’, as Martha described it. Whether it was due to how the administration wanted the classes handled, or parent withdrawal, the connections and inquiry that both educators are used to having with their students were minimal at best, which does not align with either participant’s teaching philosophy and beliefs. In the future further research should be done exploring the impact the implementation and associated challenges had on teaching practices to better understand what can be done to minimize the disruptions and challenges teachers face.

The content of the curriculum was cited as a fundamental factor in the challenges of implementing the revised 2015 HPE curriculum according to both participants. Topics such as
LGBTQ issues, relationships, body parts among others were highly contested by the community and parent populations of the participants schools. An interesting finding was that often it was the ‘teacher prompt’ section, which is not a required aspect of the curriculum that the participants noted as causing the most outrage. To better understand and alleviate the challenges presented based on the content of the curriculum future research needs to be conducted in this area with more educators.

In this chapter, I discussed the challenges that the participants identified as having an impact on the implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum. Although presented separately, all the themes are interconnected and should be explored with this relationship in mind. Lindsey and Martha’s insights reflect the sensitive and complex nature of this research topic. Chapter 5 will include the discussion of recommendations and implications of this research study, and feature areas for further research.
Chapter 5: IMPLICATIONS

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter will discuss the implications of the findings from this research study, which explored the challenges in implementing the revised 2015 Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum for teachers in diverse elementary schools in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The preceding chapters contextualized the research topic and identified the research question, and through a review of the literature, outlined the research topic and discussed the research findings. This chapter will include an overview of the key research findings and their significance. Next, the broad implications for the educational community and the narrow implications for my own practice will be discussed. Following this, recommendations and areas for further research will be outlined. Lastly, a conclusion that summarizes the research findings will be included.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

Through this research study a number of significant key findings emerged that reflect the controversial and sensitive nature of the HPE curriculum implementation in diverse schools. Based on the analysis of the two semi-structured interviews that were conducted five main themes developed: 1) Revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum content concerns, 2) Community demographics and influence, 3) Parent response to the implementation of the revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum in diverse schools, 4) Teacher feelings and experiences with the initial implementation of the revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum, 5) Impact of the implementation of the revised Ontario HPE curriculum on teaching practices.

The first finding discusses concerns regarding the content of the curriculum, which both participants identified as a considerable challenge affecting classroom implementation. The curriculum document format and parent readability illustrates one of the ways misunderstandings
have contributed to the challenges. Parents are not aware of the complexities of the curriculum document and the way that teachers can utilize their professional judgement in implementing it in the classroom. The ‘teacher prompt’ component of the curriculum document was cited as a distinct area of concern for both participants, as parents do not know that the ‘teacher prompts’ are suggestions and not requirements of the curriculum. There are specific topic areas within the revised 2015 HPE curriculum that parents had concerns about according to both participants. This finding is significant as it identifies specific curriculum content areas that contribute to the challenges teachers are having with its implementation.

Community demographics and its influence emerged as the second finding from the analysis of the interviews. Lindsey and Martha noted that the community members’ religious and cultural identity were significant factors in how the announcement and implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum was perceived in the school and outside community. This finding demonstrates the need to consider the influence of community identity on parents and schools when introducing controversial curriculum in classrooms.

The third finding analyzed the parent response to the revised 2015 HPE implementation in the study participants’ schools. Lindsey and Martha described powerful responses to the curricula introduction, which at times resulted in protests, outrage and student withdrawal. Both of the participants expressed that a lack of trust and understanding between parents and the education system contributed significantly to the parent reaction. This is a substantial finding as it points to a need for meaningful parent-teacher relationships on a continuous basis, to facilitate trust and understanding prior to challenges arising.

Teacher experiences and feelings associated with the initial implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum emerged as the fourth finding of this research study. Both participants
identified themselves as professionally supporting the content of the Human Development and Sexual Health (SHE) component of the curriculum. Although both participants’ experiences were similar in respect to resources available, Martha disclosed that she felt her board “pulled back” their support of the teachers and the curriculum due to pressure from the communities and families. This finding is critical as it indicates a need for more comprehensive support for teachers in these areas.

The fifth finding discussed the way in which the implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum impacted teaching practices. Both participants noted classroom and time management issues as having substantial influence on their respective teaching practices. The loss of preparation time due to calling parents to fill out accommodation forms, changing the timetable to minimize disruption from the mass withdrawals and shortening the content of the SHE component of the curriculum to a few classes demonstrate how the implementation impacted each participant. Both participants’ schools implemented accommodations, which reflected those requested by the parents of the students. Lindsey and Martha both noted that the loss of “teachable moments” and limited opportunities to integrate the SHE content into other curriculum areas impacted their teaching practices profoundly. This finding is significant as it illustrates the way in which teacher’s professional practices have been impacted by the implementation challenges, which have limited their abilities to deliver the curriculum in meaningful ways.

5.2 Implications

This section will identify and describe the implications for the education community and for my professional identity and practice, which are based on the key findings of the research study.
5.2.1 Broad implications: The educational community

This study found that more comprehensive support is needed on an ongoing basis from the educational community for teachers in diverse schools implementing the revised 2015 HPE curriculum. Lindsey and Martha noted that when the initial implementation took place there was a surge of support, which included numerous resources and seminars. However, at the time of the interviews for this research study both participants reported that the support and information had ceased after the initial implementation, and expressed uncertainty about support for future implementation of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum. Without comprehensive support from the administration, the board and Ministry of Education, teachers whose schools and classrooms are negotiating implementation challenges may not be adequately prepared to do so. This finding therefore implicates the educational community – at all levels by demonstrating a need to provide continuous and extensive support for teachers implementing this curriculum.

A further implication indicated by both participants is that their professional philosophies and practices had to change to meet specific instructional requirements, which they perceived as compromising their ability to deliver the curriculum in a meaningful way. Lindsey and Martha described changes such as the loss of ‘teachable moments’ and class time to cover content, as significantly impacting the thoroughness of their lessons. This highlights the need for administration, boards and the Ministry of Education to advocate for teachers use of their professional judgement and understandings in implementing the revised 2015 HPE curriculum.

The miscommunications and lack of trust between parents, community members, and the education system contributed to the challenges that the participants described having in implementing the revised 2015 HPE curriculum. Subsequently, when it was time to teach the HPE curriculum, parents did not trust the teacher’s professional judgement, which resulted in
actions like striking and mass student withdrawal. Martha’s experience demonstrated the importance of establishing connections and communication with parents prior to the introduction of contentious or sensitive subject areas. Ensuring that parents and community members trust teacher’s professional judgement is crucial to minimizing implementation challenges for the revised HPE curriculum long term. This finding demonstrates the significant professional implications for teachers in schools and communities with inadequate parent-teacher communication prior to the introduction of contentious curriculum.

Finally, the knowledge that parents and community members are reading the HPE curriculum document has distinct implications for the educational community. Educators and administration are aware of the intricacies of the curriculum document format and content, whereas most parents and community members are not. With this understanding, administration, school boards and the Ministry of Education need to be proactive and prepare for this level of parent engagement in the curriculum document and implementation in the future.

5.2.2 Narrow implications: My professional identity and practice

The findings of this research study have substantial implications for my future as an elementary school educator. During this research process, I aimed to immerse myself in the revised 2015 HPE curriculum implementation as much as possible. Through the interview process, talking to experienced educators and attending workshops I was able to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation challenges for teachers in diverse schools. Considering the complex and sensitive nature of the Human Development and Sexual Health (SHE) component of the HPE curriculum I feel that engaging in meaningful learning with my peers and other members of the educational community is crucial. As such, I will continue
pursuing opportunities such as seminars, conferences and discussions to further my professional development on this contentious but critical subject area.

5.3 Recommendations

This section outlines recommendations based on the key findings of this research study, for various stakeholders in the educational community.

Teachers

- Teachers should immerse themselves in the revised 2015 Ontario HPE curriculum document to ensure thorough comprehension of the format and content. It is essential that teachers have a clear understanding of the details of the curriculum expectations such as, the ‘teacher prompts’ and the purpose of italics, prior to implementing the curriculum in their classrooms. It is critical that teachers are knowledgeable about the curriculum so they are able to support their pedagogies and teaching practices if challenges arise.

- To be proactive, teachers in schools and communities with implementation challenges should engage in ongoing professional development related to the 2015 HPE curriculum. Seminars, discussions and resources such as, books, lesson plans and materials can support teachers by providing them information and tools that they can incorporate in their classrooms.

- Establishing strong parent-teacher relationships prior to the implementation of controversial curriculum such as the revised 2015 HPE curriculum is critically important. Teachers need to facilitate these fundamental connections with parents and families by ensuring open communication and transparency on an ongoing basis. Inviting families into the classroom when possible, sending positive notes on their child’s progress and sharing appropriate personal information are examples that can facilitate this connection.
Administration

- Administration needs to provide resources and tools to support teachers whose classes have been disrupted by the implementation challenges. Arranging for seminars, providing lesson plans and materials that teachers can use in their classrooms are examples of ways administration can support their teaching staff.

- The communication between administration and teachers needs to be open and timely to ensure that teachers feel supported and prepared when coping with the revised 2015 HPE curriculum implementation challenges. Sharing with teachers the expectations for the upcoming school year such as, timelines and accommodation protocols, are critical components for helping support teacher’s preparation and understanding.

- The role that administration has in the development of a school community is unique and powerful. Fostering a school environment that builds trust and communication makes implementing controversial curriculum less challenging. Administration can help facilitate the sense of community by being present at school events, inviting parents into the school to share their culture and experiences and share positive information with families and the communities.

School Boards

- Teachers must have access to resources such as lesson plans, unit plans and books, and seminars provided by their school boards to be effective and culturally responsive educators. Further, the board needs to demonstrate their support of teachers by defending their teaching philosophies and practices even during the implementation of sensitive subject matter. This can be done by allowing teachers to decide how many lessons their SHE units will contain, through permitting them to use their own lesson plans and
materials based on their professional discretion and taking their feedback into consideration in future planning.

- School administration needs to be supported by their school boards during the revised 2015 HPE curriculum implantation challenges, as they are also dealing with the issues. School boards should be providing administration in schools highly affected by the implementation specific resources and training they can utilize in these circumstances. Resources to help talk to concerned parents and community members, such as translators or translated materials and de-escalation techniques would be constructive tools to have.

- Utilize healthcare professionals as advocates for the SHE component of the revised 2015 HPE curriculum. This suggestion emerged from this research study, by Martha and aligns with findings by McCall, McKay and Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (2004), which noted that, “physicians, through their professional training and expertise as well is through their clinical practices, can play a leadership role in promoting this comprehensive approach [to SHE]” (p. 597). Including healthcare professionals in the community and parent seminars would remove some of the burden from the teachers and administrators, while promoting a medical approach to the curriculum, which may alleviate some concerns.

**Ministry of Education**

- Within the HPE curriculum document include a section outlining to parents the format of the document and how it will be used in the classrooms (in various languages). This could include explaining, that the ‘teacher prompt’ portions are not actually curriculum expectations to be covered, but rather ideas that teachers can utilize at their own
discretion and/or that ‘demonstrate an understanding’ does not mean a physical demonstration and is found throughout all curriculum documents.

- Simultaneously to the HPE curriculum document release, a ‘companion’ curriculum document for parents could be released explaining the content and format of the curriculum in less educational terms. The goal of this would be to promote transparency about the details of the curriculum and make it easier for parents to understand it- ideally resulting in less confusion and miscommunication.

- Consider a revision to the format of the document, such as removing the ‘teacher prompts’ and distributing them as a resource for teachers separately. As parents and community members’ are not aware of the formatting intricacies and meanings removing them may alleviate some of the confusion and conflict associated with these areas of the document.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

This research study contributed significant findings to the existing literature and has identified areas for further research. The challenges in implementing the revised 2015 HPE curriculum in diverse elementary schools for teachers in the GTA is a complex issue, which requires in-depth research. An essential area for further research is expanding the number of participants in the study. Specifically, male elementary teachers and teachers who do not consider themselves comfortable with teaching the revised 2015 HPE curriculum need to be interviewed, as this research study did not include these perspectives. Further, conducting quantitative research to gather information from educators would illustrate experiences and areas of concern for a greater number of teachers, thus highlighting areas that require additional support on a larger scale. Having a comprehensive understanding of the challenges associated
with this subject area is critical to be able to support the teachers in these schools in meaningful ways.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The implementation challenges of the revised Ontario 2015 HPE curriculum for teachers in diverse elementary schools illustrate the complicated and sensitive nature of this curriculum. The experience I had working in one of the schools with intense opposition at the time of the curriculum announcement guided this research study. The intense opposition that followed the announcement and implementation of the SHE component of the HPE curriculum in some elementary schools in the GTA pointed to a crucial need for research in this area. The purpose of this research study was to develop an understanding of the teacher experiences in schools with these challenges. The key findings, which emerged from this research study, identified that teachers in these schools need more comprehensive support from all levels of the educational community than what they are provided with presently. The controversy surrounding the revised 2015 Ontario HPE curriculum is likely to be an enduring feature in our schools, communities and society, making it critical that all teachers are prepared to cope with the ensuing challenges.
References


http://dx.doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1997.t01-25-00999.x


Appendix A

Dear ______________________________,

My name is Alexandra Fragiadakis and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research study will explore the current challenges elementary teachers are facing in implementing the revised 2015 Ontario Health and Physical Activity curriculum, specifically the Human Development and Sexual Health strand, in diverse schools in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Furthermore, I will attempt to identify strategies that would make this curriculum accessible to all students.

I am interested in interviewing general education teachers in the GTA who have experience teaching both the past and current, 2015 updated Health and Physical Education curriculum in diverse schools. I believe that your knowledge and experience will provide valuable insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Angela MacDonald. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,
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 from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Alexandra Fragiadakis 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 Questions:

Background Information:

1) How long have you been a teacher?
   a) How long have you been a teacher in this board?
   b) How long have you been a teacher at this school?

2) What grade(s) do you currently teach?
   a) How long have you taught this grade?
   b) What other grades have you taught?

3) Do you have a teaching philosophy? Does it apply to teaching the updated HPE curriculum?

4) Can you describe the community that this school is in? (e.g. socioeconomic status, diversity, English Language Learners)

5) Based on the topic of my study you have identified that you have experience, (both past and present) with teaching the Health and Physical Education curriculum in primary/junior grades, in the Greater Toronto Area. Specifically, which grades have you taught HPE in? (both current and past versions).

Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs:

6) Describe your comfort level in teaching the previous version(s) of the HPE curriculum? Describe your comfortable level in teaching the new curriculum?

7) Is there any specific topic or approach in the updated HPE curriculum that changed your comfort level? Please explain.

8) As an educator, do you believe Human Development and Sexual Health should be part of the mandatory curriculum?
   a) If so, at what age do you believe any form of Human Development and Sexual Health should start?

9) Overall, how do you feel about the content of the updated HPE curriculum?
   a) is there anything you disagree with including? And why?
   b) is there anything you think should have been included? And why.
10) Based on participant selection criteria, you identified that your school/classroom experienced some disruption at the announcement of the updated HPE implementation. In what ways was your school/classroom disrupted? How did this impact the school/community?

**Teacher Experiences:**

11) Based on your experiences and insights, what topics in the updated HPE curriculum (Human Development Sexual Education) appeared to present the most challenges?

12) What factors do you believe contributed the most to the challenges and conflict?

13) What has been your biggest challenge in implementing the curriculum? Please explain.

**Teaching Practices:**

14) In what ways (if any) have the challenges and conflict impacted your teaching practices?

15) Do you believe that there are teaching solutions or resolutions that could be (or have been) created to attempt to alleviate some of the challenges and conflicts?
   a) have these solutions already been attempted? Were they successful? Why do you think they were or were not successful?
   b) do you have ideas for solutions? Have you proposed or implemented them? Were they successful? Why do you think they were or were not successful? Or why have you not implemented them?

**Supports and Challenges:**

16) What procedures are currently in place in your school (or board) for teaching the updated HPE curriculum?

17) Do you feel you have been adequately supported and prepared for teaching the updated HPE curriculum?
   a) What has been positive? And what could be improved in terms of support?

18) How has the school community responded now that the curriculum has been implemented?

**Next Steps:**

19) Is there anything you would do (or believe should be done) differently, as far as implementing this curriculum in the future?

20) Are there other topics you would like added to the curriculum?

21) Do you believe the challenges and conflict will decrease in this school community over time?
22) Are there other areas you would like to see researched? If so, why?

23) Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for your participation and valuable insights into this topic.