Consent in Sex Education: Teacher Perspectives on Teaching Consent in the
Updated Health and Physical Education Curriculum

By

Alexandra Kelly

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Abstract

Explicit discussions about consent have been missing from Canadian sex education and have the potential to enable students to have difficult conversations about their limits, boundaries and desires in intimate relationships. Although consent is now expected to be taught by Ontario teachers in elementary and high schools due to the recent Health and Physical Education curriculum update, a thorough review revealed that ‘consent’ is undefined in the document. Teachers are potentially left to conceptualize and interpret the meaning of consent without any clear guidelines as to what it really is and how to teach it to students of various ages.

This research study employed a qualitative research approach consisting of a review of the relevant literature about the topic, as well as in-person, semi-structured interviews with two Ontario Health and Physical Education teachers. Through the data analysis, four main themes emerged that highlight connections between teacher practice and current research. These themes centre on teacher recognition of the importance of teaching consent to the lives of students and how teachers teach consent differently by gender. They highlight the difficulties teachers face in understanding consent and translating the meaning of consent into language their students can understand, pointing to the need for additional support and resources in the teaching of consent.

Keywords: consent, sex education, Health and Physical Education, teachers
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction: Research Context and Problem

The majority of Canadians have their first sexual experiences during their teenage years and adolescence is an important time for young people begin exploring their sexuality (SIECCAN, 2015). Navigating the sometimes winding road to sexual discovery and sexual agency can be a daunting experience for any adolescent, one that can be influenced by a myriad of factors, including parents, peers, (social) media and pop culture, and school-based sex education. In Ontario, sex education falls within the purview of the Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015a; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015b). Teachers therefore play a key role in helping young people to understand the complexities and diversity of sex and modern sexuality, develop sexual empowerment and agency, and acquire the tools to recognize and engage in healthy sexual relationships into adulthood.

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada (2003), the goal of sex education is twofold: “to help people achieve positive outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, respect for self and others, non-exploitive sexual relations, rewarding human relationships, informed reproductive choices), and to avoid negative outcomes (e.g., STI/HIV, sexual coercion, unintended pregnancy)” (p. 8). Although sex education programing is still a controversial provision in today’s schools, its place within education is not without merit as “sexuality is a fundamental aspect of being human, and as such, needs to be addressed as part of the educational experiences of children and youth.” (Meaney et al., 2009, p. 107). Regardless, no other part of school-based curriculum generates as much controversy as sex education (Corngold, 2013). Although people generally agree that it should be a part of our education system, what should be taught, when and to what extent, have
been sources of ongoing and often intense debate for many years (e.g., Corngold, 2013; McKay et al., 2014; Scales, 1981).

In Ontario, controversy surrounding the HPE curriculum has been ongoing (McKay et al., 2014). Prior to the recent 2015 update, the curriculum had not been amended since 1998, over fifteen years ago (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015a; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015b). However, this was not the first time the Government of Ontario proposed a curriculum update to better align the curriculum with the changing realities of young people and sex (McKay et al., 2014). The proposed 2010 revision was withdrawn by the Ministry of Education due to media reports and commentaries claiming a large majority of parents were against any amendments to its content. 2015 marks the first time the curriculum has been successfully updated, despite the controversy surrounding its release; it will now include topics like sexual orientation, sexting and consent (Do, 2015; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015a; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015b; Ross, 2015). In fact, Ontario is the first province to explicitly mention consent in the curriculum; other provinces teach related concepts to provide students with the tools to make decisions about consent, but the term itself is not used (Smusiak, 2015).

Explicit discussions about consent have been missing from Canadian sex education and have the potential to enable students to have difficult conversations about their limits, boundaries and desires in intimate relationships (Lindgren et al., 2009). According to the Canadian Women’s Foundation, although most Canadians agree that sex must be consensual, two-thirds of those surveyed do not fully understand how to properly give or get consent (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2015). Many have also pointed to the lack of consent education in schools as a contributing factor to sexual violence (Raphael, 2015). “To reduce the likelihood of sexual assault and to promote equitable, healthy relationships, young people need to learn the
communication skills to express non-consent (i.e., refusal) to engage in sexual activity and to ensure that mutual consent exists between partners if sexual activity does occur through the expression of affirmative consent” (SIECCAN, 2015, p. 16). In the Canadian context, sexual assault disproportionately affects young people (p. 15). Effective school-based sex education should help “individuals to become more sensitive and aware of the impact their behaviours and actions may have on others” and conversations about consent are the first step in this regard (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008, p. 11).

The concept of consent is considered to be both a controversial and a vital addition to the update: it is controversial because it moves away from previous teachings of sex education that focused on abstinence and the dangers of risky sexual behavior (McKay et al., 2014), and it is considered vital as research shows links between the absence of proper sex education – including the lack of understanding or disregard of consent – and sexual violence and assault (Raphael, 2015). Much has changed for adolescents with regard to sex and sexuality, and the curriculum should help to better prepare young people to meet these challenges.

The previous Ontario curriculum was vague, focusing mainly on the dangers of sex, including pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and heavily favouring abstinence programing (Meaney et al., 2009). The updated curriculum moves away from this framework, instead centering sex education on developing and maintaining healthy relationships, of which consent is an integral part (Meaney et al., 2009; Smylie et al., 2008). The updated curriculum introduces the concept of consent gradually, beginning in grade 2 with students expected to demonstrate the ability to stand up for themselves and say no. Each year, the language and themes build upon the central concept of healthy relationships and by the time students reach grades 7, 8 and 9, understanding consent is explicitly stated as an expectation (Ontario Ministry
of Education, 2015a; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015b). With the updated curriculum coming into effect now, there is a lack of scaffolding for students entering the later grades and teachers must therefore fill the gap in understanding. In addition, although consent is now expected to be taught by Ontario teachers in elementary and high schools, a thorough review revealed that ‘consent’ is undefined in the curriculum. Teachers are potentially left to conceptualize and interpret the meaning of consent without any clear guidelines as to what it really is and how to teach it to students of various ages.

1.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this interview-based study is to explore how HPE educators understand and reportedly operationalize the concept of consent in the updated HPE curriculum. In view of the lack of a clear definition of consent and its link to sexual violence, the goal of my research is to learn how teachers are defining and operationalizing consent, ensuring students’ understanding of the complexities and nuances of the word, framed within the updated sex education component of the HPE curriculum. 2015/2016 was the first school year in which the updated HPE curriculum came into effect and the first time consent was an explicit part of sex education in Ontario. In order to better understand how teachers conceptualize consent, I interviewed teachers about their experiences introducing the concept to students this past year, their strategies for defining the word in contexts students understand, and how they are reportedly evaluating student comprehension. I also address teacher strategies for teaching consent to those students who have not been previously introduced to the necessary building blocks and scaffolding in earlier grades to develop a comprehensive understanding of the word. In addition, I wish to assess how teachers understand their teaching of consent to be affected by students’ gender expression and identity and how they deal with any controversy that may arise
in their teaching of the updated curriculum. It may be many years before research can be done to adequately assess the impact the updated HPE curriculum has had on students, but in asking these initial questions about teaching updated sex education and consent, I hope to shed light on how teachers are conceptualizing the subject matter and introducing the topic of consent to their students.

1.2 Research Questions

The central question guiding this study is: how are HPE teachers using, understanding and experiencing the topic of consent in Ontario schools? Sub-questions to further guide this inquiry are:

- How do teachers define consent for the purposes of teaching it in sex education?
- What are the best practices that teachers have learned or are reportedly employing in their first year of teaching consent in the updated curriculum?
- How do teachers reportedly assess students’ understanding of the complexities of consent?
- How do teachers understand their teaching of consent to be affected by student gender identity or expression?
- How do teachers respond to the controversy surrounding the updated curriculum and perceptions that parents and students may have?

1.3 Background of the Researcher

I am a 30 year old woman who was born and raised in Hamilton, Ontario in a middle-class family. My parents were very liberal and open about sex education and encouraged me to ask questions about sex, however awkward that might be for a teenager. Growing up in Ontario, my school sex education fell within the 1998 curriculum. It was often restricted to negative
consequences of sex and did not empower students to take agency over their own sexual choices. My last experience with sex education in school was in my grade 9 mandatory, female-only HPE class. I do not recall learning explicitly about consent, but more about my choice to become sexually active in the first place and the benefits of abstinence over the dangers of risky sexual behaviour. These dangers (teenage pregnancy, STIs, sexual abuse, etc.) were emphasized at the expense of the positive aspects of sexuality. We were continually told how our decision to become sexually active could change our lives and was not a decision we could take lightly; in fact, we were encouraged not to make that decision at all. If we did become sexually active, it was either implied or explicitly stated that we were risking our futures and our reputations.

I was lucky in that my parents empowered me to make decisions about my life and sexuality, making me feel as though I could be trusted to make those decisions for myself, and empowering me to cultivate my own sexual agency. However, many students do not receive adequate sex education and are discouraged from taking ownership over their sexual development (Brunk et al., 2008). They are left instead to navigate sexual experiences and their own sexuality without adequate information about both the good and the bad aspects of sex. Although consent is often discussed in relation to rape and sexual assault, it is just as much a part of positive, healthy sexual relationships. Being able to discuss sexual boundaries, negotiate sexual encounters, and communicate sexual desire and intent are important features of healthy relationships; therefore, consent should be included in sex education.

The updated Ontario HPE curriculum is a leap forward in school-based sex education, being the first Canadian curriculum to explicitly mention consent (Smusiak, 2015), but there are still steps to take to ensure a more holistic approach to sex education. I believe that this curriculum update – fifteen years in the making – is a positive step in the right direction.
Teachers can provide a unique insight into how the inclusion of consent in the HPE curriculum will be manifested in teaching sex education. As an aspiring HPE instructor myself, I want to further explore this topic to better equip myself for teaching a holistic and comprehensive sex education and ensuring students are empowered to embrace their sexuality and sexual agency.

1.4 Overview

To respond to my research questions, I conducted a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview two physical education teachers about their reported strategies for defining and teaching the concept of consent to students as a part of the updated HPE curriculum. In the second chapter of my research paper, I review the literature in the areas of adolescents and sex, sex education and consent, looking at what the research reveals about the concept of consent in theory and in practice, and the role sex education plays in how young people understand consent and navigate their sexual experiences. In chapter three, I elaborate on my research design and in chapter four, I report my research findings and discuss their signification in the context of the existing research literature. In the final chapter, I identify the implications of the research for my own teacher identity and practice as a HPE teacher, and for the educational research community more broadly. I also articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings, and point to areas for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I review the literature in the areas pertaining to adolescent sexual behaviours, school-based sex education and consent. More specifically, I review research on how adolescents understand sexuality and navigate their sexual experiences, and on the role sex education plays in shaping young people’s understanding of their own sexual agency. Following from this, I review the research on school-based sex education – its role in and impact on – young people’s lives. I then address the literature on consent, the contentious meanings of consent and how consent is conceptualized and communicated by young people in sexual situations. The consent research addresses the connections among young people, consent and sexual assault and what the research recommends for consent education.

2.1 Young People and Sex

Sex can be an integral part of adolescence; a time in which young people begin to explore their sexual agency and experiment with their first sexual experiences (Arbeit, 2014; Michels et al., 2005). How young people make decisions about their sexuality, and how and when they will engage in sexual activity are important considerations in developing and assessing successful sex education programing in schools. Therefore, a review of the research regarding adolescents and sex is required to better understand the sexual influences youth encounter as they begin to develop their sexual selves. In order to better understand the implications for teaching consent in the updated HPE curriculum, it is important that I better understand the research context and assess the field of consent and sex education research. This is necessary to appreciate the insights, challenges and opportunities found in the research to determine what might be missing and what my own research can contribute to this field.
One body of research focusing on youth and sex looks at the ways in which adolescents interact with each other and conceptualize sexual relationships (Brunk et al., 2008; Michels et al., 2005). Healthy sexual relationships are considered an important skill to develop in adolescence as they can be “an essential component of a happy, productive and fulfilling life.” (Brunk et al., 2008, p. 73). Decisions about when and how to have sex are at the forefront of young people’s sexual decision making and are often influenced by factors overlooked in formal sex education programs (Michels et al., 2005). In their interview-based study of grade nine students and their decisions to become sexually active, Michels et al. found that young people often consider relationship and personal characteristics in whether or not to engage in sexual activities with a partner. The adolescents they studied pointed to a partner’s reputation and sexual history as central determining factors for engaging in sex. Other factors that one might consider, such as length of the relationship or consideration of health risks, were not top of mind for many of the young people they interviewed. Similarly, Ott and Millstein (2006) addressed the positive motivations that influence young people to have sex as opposed to the negative influences that may deter them. They found that for adolescents, “perceived benefits may be at least as motivating as perceived risks in sexual decision making.” (Ott & Millstein, 2006, p. 84). These positive influences included intimacy, sexual pleasure and social status and were considered important goals for adolescents: goals that they could achieve through sex. Therefore, the motivations that drive adolescents to become sexually active can be just as important as the negative factors that may dissuade them from engaging in sexual behaviours. Understanding young people’s sexual decision making and the various influences that may affect their sexual choices and behaviours is necessary in order to better appreciate the ways in which adolescents navigate and conceptualize their sexual experiences.
In their study of young women and sex, McCabe and Killackey (2004) found that adolescent women often experience pressure from a diverse range of factors on whether or not to engage in sexual activity, including perceptions of the appropriateness of particular behaviours and perceived norms subscribed to by peers and parents. For young women, perception is a determining factor in sexual decision making as “the beliefs that young women have regarding whether or not engaging in sex is appropriate, shapes their own intentions to engage in the behaviour” (p. 24). Their research highlighted that there are several factors that may influence young women to engage in sexual activity, “shaped by a consideration of their own beliefs and the norms of important others in their lives” (p. 25). One thing that did not play a role in these young women’s sexual decision making was sex education.

As Abel and Fitzgerald (2006) articulate, it is important to examine “the ways the messages of formal sexuality teaching are received, resisted or reworked in adolescent experience.” (p. 107). Adolescent sexuality is contextual and sex education is understood by adolescents within their own lived experiences. It is therefore important to recognize the “diversity and complexity of young people’s sexual selves” in delivering sex education programing to adolescents (p. 117). The literature on how young people’s sexual experiences are incorporated into sex education programing will be assessed in the following sections.

2.2 School-Based Sex Education

Formal sex education has been a source of controversy and as the release of the updated Ontario HPE curriculum highlights, continues to be a source of debate. Herold and Benson (1979) conducted a comprehensive Ontario-based study of the problems teachers encountered teaching sex education. The teachers involved in the research stressed fear of controversy as a hindrance to their abilities to teach sex education. They also felt their school administration was
more concerned with the potential opposition of parents than the needs of students. Although the majority of parents support school-based sex education (see Mckay et al., 2014; Scales, 1981), the perception that they do not has nevertheless had an impact on teaching. In Herold and Benson’s (1979) study, other major issues teachers faced when teaching sex education included lack of student maturity and student knowledge, student shyness, conflicts in values, a lack of adequate teacher training and a lack of proper materials and resources. More specifically, teachers cited the curriculum to be outdated, too conservative and reinforcing traditional sex-role stereotypes as a central concern in their teaching practice. Although the study was conducted over thirty years ago, much of the research on sex education shows many of the same issues and concerns still exist.

In their research on students’ satisfaction with their school-based sex education in Ontario, Meaney et al. (2009) asked students to provide feedback on their sex education experiences and teachers. They argue that teachers are a vital component of any educational system and as such, are critical for the delivery of effective sex education programing. However, teachers often receive little or no pre-service sex education training and lack confidence in the material being taught, contributing to less effective instruction. Despite this, students generally rated their sex education instructors positively and expressed general satisfaction with their instruction. Teachers can therefore play a central role in how adolescents approach their sex education and can influence how students learn the material (Meaney et al., 2009).

Teacher preparedness and training continues to be a primary concern for teachers tasked with teaching sex education. In the research highlighted above, teachers shared their experiences and feelings about their level of comfort and preparedness teaching formal sex education in schools and cite several issues, including lack of training and access to resources and materials.
Although teachers have indicated a lack of support teaching formal sex education, according to the students in Meaney et al. (2009)’s study, teachers have had a positive impact on their sex education.

The below subsections delve into the research surrounding school-based sex education, in particular, the issues present in today’s sex education and the role it can play in perpetuating gender stereotypes about sexual relationships and consent, highlighting what might be missing from sex education and the ways in which sex education does not adequately reflect the experiences and identities of young people today.

2.2.1 Issues with today’s sex education. Much of the literature (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006; Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Lindgren et al., 2009) emphasizes the importance of taking into account adolescents’ own sexual experiences as a means of developing more holistic approaches to sex education; it is arguably the youth voice that is absent from sex education. All aspects of adolescents’ experiences are necessary if sex education is to be relevant and useful to young people (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013). As articulated by Meaney et al. (2009), “students who have completed their secondary school education are expected to have sufficient sexual health education to actively pursue healthy sexual relationships.” (p. 108). However, this is not always the case. In their study of young people and sexuality, Abel and Fitzgerald (2006) interviewed adolescents to uncover what they consider to be important and missing in sex education and “how relevant sex education is to their experiences negotiating [their] sexuality.” (p. 107) and found that young people’s perceptions of the risks to their reputation and subjectivity overrode the health risks inherent in unprotected sex. Students in their first years of college and university provided Lindgren et al. (2009) with insights into their experiences and perceptions of sex education as they transitioned into higher education settings. Many of the
study’s participants cited a gap between sex education in secondary school and their actual experiences navigating their sexuality in a college environment, commenting that they were ill prepared for the realities and diverseness of sex (Lindgren et al., 2009).

Sex is continually evolving with the use of technology and changing attitudes; sex education must therefore adapt to meet the needs of youth and their shifting sexual behaviours and experiences (Kippax et al., 2005). Formal sex education has been accused of not adapting to changing attitudes and failing to take into account adolescent experiences. For instance, much of formal sex education advocates pre-marital abstinence or sex with a committed partner, but in reality, many adolescents engage in sex outside a relationship (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006). This finding was reinforced by Michels et al.’s (2005) research, which highlights how social context affects adolescent sexual decision making as above. Although students are aware of the sexual health discourses of safe sex reinforced by school-based sex education programs, many of these practices have been found (e.g., Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006) to not always be compatible with the sexual identity young people desire and wish to reproduce in their sex lives. In their study, Smylie et al. (2008) looked at the ways in which sex education was delivered to grade nine students in an area of Ontario, finding the positive aspects of sexuality missing in teaching sex education and highlighting the need for more multidimensional sex education programming in Canada. As Connell (2005) aptly explains, “we must put the sex back into sex education” (p. 264). Sex education may not adequately reflect students’ own personal experiences with sex and thus may be ineffective in supporting students to develop healthy and positive sexual relationships.

2.2.1.1 Sex education and gender stereotypes. Another finding pertains to the role sex education seemingly plays in reinforcing gender stereotypes (Bay-Cheng et al., 2011; Brunk et
al., 2008; Connell, 2005; Meaney et al., 2009; Smylie et al., 2008). Connell (2005) conducted a study of the ways in which women in particular conceptualize pleasure and danger in sex education in the Ontario context. Her research reveals that within Ontario’s earlier sex education curriculum and its delivery, official discourses directed at girls were framed within the context of victimization and individual morality (Connell, 2005). The discourse of victimization highlights women’s vulnerability in sexual situations and the “need to defend themselves against disease, pregnancy and ‘being used’” (p. 257). Individual morality was also found to be perpetuated in Ontario sex education for girls, elevating premarital abstinence and chastity above other choices. Connell explains that these two discourses are not mutually exclusive, but reinforce each other: “if you make an irresponsible, unhealthy choice, if you do [italics in original] have sex, there will be negative consequences.” (p. 258). Girls were often told to abstain from sex or else risk venereal disease, unwanted pregnancy or sexual assault; their sexual agency is diminished as they are discouraged from actively making decisions about their own sexuality. This echoes much earlier findings by Fine (1988). In her school-based research with adolescent females in New York City, Fine found that “female adolescents continue to be educated as though they were the potential victims of sexual (male) desire…currently educated away from positions of sexual self-interest” (p. 42; italics in original). This reinforces the argument that not only are young people not able to explore their sexuality and sexual empowerment, but young females in particular are often deprived of realizing their sexual agency, relegated instead to the passive role of victim.

Contrary to female sex education, official discourses directed at adolescent males emphasize their roles as active agents in their sexuality (Connell, 2005). This dichotomy perpetuates gender stereotypes and contributes to the belief that males are instigators of sexual
encounters and females are gatekeepers, either allowing or preventing sex from occurring (Bay-Cheng et al., 2011; Connell, 2005; Meaney et al., 2009). It depicts sex as adversarial, with men and women on opposite sides. In addition, the pressures placed on young males to adhere to particular forms of heterosexual masculinity can have an impact on the ways in which they relate to sex and their own sexuality (Strange et al., 2003). In particular, Strange et al. found, in their interview study of student preferences for single or mixed sex education, that the demand to be ‘masculine’ forces young males to conform to a particular societal norm, reinforcing particular sexual behaviours as expected and all others as ‘not normal’. The ways in which sex education is understood by males and females are underscored by complex “social discourses about sex and sexuality, discourses about sex within sex education in school, and discourses within the school and peer groups about power, authority, gender and sex” (p. 212). Measor (2004) also found this to be the case, arguing that “gender is influential in adolescent responses to sex, sexuality and relationships education” (p. 155). In her comprehensive study of how young males and females respond to sex education, she addressed the ways in which gender can play a role in information and knowledge building about sex. In particular, young boys are more likely to come to learn about sex from peers and commercial sources including pornography, but are less likely to engage with adults about sex education. Measor argues that this plays a role in how males in particular conceptualize sex, masculinity and relationships, which are not adequately taken into account in sex education programing.

As the next section on consent research will address these pervasive sexual ‘norms’ about masculinity and femininity and the roles males and females are expected to play in sexual situations – reinforced in official sex education discourses – affect adolescent sexual behaviour and contribute to misconceptions about consent.
2.2.1.2 What’s missing from sex education? Much of the research surrounding sex education identifies aspects of adolescent experiences that are missing from sex education. As discussed above, pleasure and desire, two important aspects of sexuality, are often excluded or minimized in official discourses as “the view of youth sexuality as inherently dangerous pervades formal sexuality education.” (Bay-Cheng et al., 2011, p. 1168). In addition to pleasure and desire, adequate relationship skills are frequently not taught and thus may be inadequately developed by young people (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006). In particular, assertiveness, negotiation and communication skills are important in setting sexual boundaries but are often not given enough of a focus in sex education (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006; Lindgren et al., 2009). The research about consent reviewed in the next section shows how these skills are essential in helping youth navigate their sexuality and establish and communicate their limits in sexual situations.

In much of the sex education literature, adolescent heterosexual relationships are the focus of the research. These heteronormative images and discourses of sex mirror the ideal relationships championed by sex education programing (Connell, 2005). The emphasis on male/female interactions tends to exclude other relationships and experiences in which young people may engage. It is important, therefore, to recognize in official sex education discourses, research and programing that heterosexuality is only one relationship configuration amongst many. Connell explains the importance of deconstructing gender, gender expectations and traditional gender roles as a means of fostering adolescent sexual development, ensuring that the diversity of youth experiences is taken into consideration in sex education.

2.3 Consent Research
Researchers have analyzed the context in which consent is given and received and how adolescents understand its meaning in sexual encounters as a way to better inform education programs about the nature of consent in practice (Arbeit, 2014; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014; Lindgren et al., 2009; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). Much of the research highlights the complexities of consent in sexual situations and the diverse ways in which adolescents understand and communicate consent (Farris et al., 2008; Gray, 2015; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). The literature also points to no clear-cut definition, but rather constructs consent as a continuous process rather than a dichotomous ‘yes’ or ‘no’ (Gray, 2015; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). For instance, Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) explain consent as both a state of mind (a feeling of willingness) and a behaviour (a verbal or physical expression of willingness). Note that consent is not just saying ‘yes’ to engage in sexual activity, but can also manifest as physical, nonverbal expressions of assent (Humphreys, 2007). This is consistent with the concept of consent as various behaviours that indicate willingness rather than an explicit statement of agreement (Gray, 2015). These behaviours may be direct or indirect and may include verbal or nonverbal expressions of acquiescence (Farris et al., 2008; Gray, 2015; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007).

Much of the research highlights the expectation that consent be freely given, explicit, clear, and offered free from pressure, coercion or intoxication (Arbeit, 2014; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 2007). However, in practice, scholars do acknowledge that there are less explicit forms of sexual communication that do not adhere to these expectations (Farris et al., 2008; Gray, 2015; Humphreys, 2007; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014). How consent is communicated between partners is complex and nuanced. The ‘enthusiastic, verbal yes’ promoted by sexual
assault prevention programs does not take into account the many indirect and nonverbal strategies that adolescents may use to communicate consent (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014). Indeed, Lindgren et al. (2009) found that both college males and females in their study preferred indirect and nonverbal forms of sexual communication. They found that there was considerable reluctance on the part of young adults to communicate directly and verbally with their partners about sex. Young people, and male adolescents in particular, often communicate sexual interest and consent nonverbally and indirectly as a means of avoiding rejection.

Both men and women use and understand subtle indicators of sexual consent that are not always the same for both sexes (Gray, 2015). Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) explain the importance of better understanding the context surrounding consent and how this context can affect how men and women conceptualize consent. They further describe some explanations of consent that centre on resistance to sex as an indicator of non-consent; consent is assumed until someone refuses or resists. Other understandings of consent advocate for the opposite: non-consent should be assumed until both parties actively agree to engage in sex (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999).

The research on consent in practice is complex and highlights a divergence between how consent is taught and how it is communicated in sexual situations. The subsections below address the misconceptions in how consent is defined and how this affects consent in practice, looking at how consent is communicated and understood by gender. This is followed by an analysis of the research on teaching consent and what adolescents should be taught to understand consent in practice.

2.3.1 **Defining consent.** As in the research reviewed above, sex education does not always adequately reflect the realities of young people. However, sex education still plays a role
in how adolescents interact with each other and negotiate their sexual encounters. The concept of consent is one area of young people’s sexual experiences that is often either not included in sex education programing or it is explained superficially, without sufficient examination of how adolescents negotiate sexual encounters (Arbeit, 2014). Although consent is a buzzword in rape prevention strategies and other educational programs, a straightforward and clear definition is absent and the term is often used without being explained (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). When it is used in educational environments, the ways in which consent is taught do not often mirror the ways in which adolescents interact with one another in sexual situations, often missing the complexities of how consent is communicated (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014). Much of the consent research reviewed here focuses on heterosexual sexual encounters and how men and women communicate consent.

2.3.2 Consent, miscommunication and bad sexual behaviours. Although the above research highlights the complexities of consent and the absence of a universal definition, scholars do underscore that consent is more than a verbal ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and an acceptance of that answer. It is a complex dance of often nonverbal and indirect communication between couples negotiating their desires, boundaries and participation in sexual activities. However, how these signals are understood and communicated can potentially lead to miscommunications, misunderstandings, sexual assault and rape (Farris et al., 2008; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Lindgren et al., 2009).

Rape and sexual assault are often described as the absence of sexual consent (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014). Consent plays a central role in the definition of rape, both in legal and research terms; but as stated earlier, context is important in assessing young people’s perceptions of consent and assault (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). When studying how adolescents
understand consent, Humphreys (2007) found that factors such as the length of a relationship and whether the couple had engaged in sexual activity before influenced the perceived need for consent; the longer couples had been in a relationship and the more sexual encounters they had shared, the less adolescents believed consent was required. These gray areas blur the boundaries between consensual and non-consensual sexual activity, potentially leading to sexual exploitation. They also highlight misconceptions that inform how adolescents negotiate sexual encounters and conceptualize consent.

Another area explored by the consent research highlights possible differences in men’s and women’s signals of sexual interest and intent (Farris et al., 2008; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Humphreys 2007; Lindgren et al., 2009). Farris et al. (2008) describe how misperceptions can be present at all stages of a sexual encounter and often manifest as decoding errors in reading sexual interest. Here, gender can play a significant role in reading and understanding sexual intent, particularly with regard to men’s abilities to interpret women’s signals and intentions (Farris et al., 2008; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Humphreys 2007; Lindgren et al., 2009). Several research studies reviewed here (Farris et al., 2008; Fava & Bay-Cheng, 2012; Gray, 2015; Lindgren et al., 2009) found that men perceive women’s signals to be more sexual in nature than women intended; indeed, women often perceived these signals to not be indicative of sexual interest at all, but often meant to convey friendship. And even when they did pick up on women’s behavioural cues indicating lack of interest, the men in Lindgren et al. (2009)’s study reported they would on occasion choose to disregard these signals. Therefore, the differences in how men and women read each other’s signals and behaviours for sexual interest can lead to misperception.
Another area in which gender may play a role in perceptions of sexual intent is the meaning given to women’s comportment and in particular their clothing (Farris et al., 2008; Gray, 2015; Lindgren et al., 2009). Men are much more likely to view what women are wearing as an indicator of their intent to engage in sexual activity; this feeds into the belief that some women are ‘asking for it’ and perpetuates myths and stereotypes about rape and sexual assault (Gray, 2015). Rape myths are troubling as they have an influence on perceptions of what constitutes reasonable consent; for instance, those who endorse these myths are more likely to see questionable sexual behaviour (i.e., where consent is not clear) not as harassment, but rather to see it as a misunderstanding or to blame the victim of an assault for their behaviour (Gray, 2015). As Gray (2015) articulates, consent and expectation are separate entities in sexual encounters. According Lindgren et al. (2009), their findings “suggest that there are a myriad of ways in which the sexual communication between partners may be ambiguous, unclear, confusing, misunderstood, and potentially pave the way for a nonconsensual encounter” (p. 500).

The sex education discourses of risk and danger emphasize both girls’ vulnerability and culpability with regard to sexual coercion and assault (Bay-Cheng et al., 2011). As women are often imagined as the gatekeepers and men as the instigators of sex, men are seen to be the ones required to ask for sexual consent and women to grant or deny it (Gray, 2015; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Humphreys, 2007). As discussed earlier, the differences in perception between many men and women’s sexual perceptions and intent lead to the argument that men’s innate sex drive is a central reason for sexual coercion and violence (Bay-Cheng et al., 2011; Humphreys, 2009). Indeed, as Humphreys (2009) has found, men may therefore perceive consent to be less important to them as they see it as the responsibility of the female to ‘give the all clear’. This is further reinforced by pervasive discourses that tell women to clearly and
explicitly communicate their sexual intentions as a means of protecting themselves from assault; however, this is problematic as “it suggests that it is women’s responsibility to ensure that men understand their sexual intentions, not men’s responsibility to listen to their partner…or to get clear consent before proceeding.” (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999, p. 270).

Miscommunications, misunderstandings and even a disregard for consent perpetuate myths about whose responsibility it is to give and get consent, leading to instances of assault and sexual violence. The ways in which we teach consent by continuing to reinforce gender stereotypes about who has the responsibility to seek consent can contribute to these misconceptions. The research reviewed above shows the complex ways in which adolescents both understand and communicate consent and must be taken into consideration in how we teach consent to students.

2.3.3 Teaching consent. As the term is vague, nuanced and complex, consent proves to be a difficult concept to teach (Arbeit, 2014). In much of the research on consent, it is considered a pivotal issue to teach students “because the difference between abusive and non-abusive sexual relations typically rests on freely given informed consent” (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013, p. 127). Many education programs, including rape prevention programs, use consent as a mechanism for reducing sexual assault without explaining what the concept implies (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014). As discussed in earlier sections, the verbal, direct assent promoted by many education and sexual assault prevention programs does not take into account the ways in which adolescents communicate consent and negotiate their sexual encounters (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014). Indeed, adolescents are wary of verbalizing consent for fear of rejection and often favour indirect and nonverbal forms of sexual communication (Lindgren et al., 2009). However, verbal
and direct consent is the clearest and most effective way of communicating and ensuring consent before proceeding with sexual activity (Gray, 2015).

Although there is little research on teaching consent in formal education settings, much of the consent literature highlights avenues for additional research and suggestions for improving awareness of consent’s implications, which could be incorporated into sex education programing (Lindgren et al., 2009). Aspects that are not adequately covered in sex education are increasing assertiveness, negotiation and communication skills (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2009; Brunk et al., 2008). These relationship skills help adolescents to articulate their expectations, negotiate their sexual experiences and limits, and assert their agency in sexual situations (Brunk et al., 2008). As highlighted by Arbeit’s research, “[s]kills for consent that include the ability to identify, articulate and address power dynamics may strengthen young people’s potential to prevent coercion and to promote consent” (p. 271). This is reinforced by Jozkowski and Peterson (2014) who advocate for “more refined approaches to helping students understand why verbalizing consent would be beneficial or focusing on skills-based training to help students practice verbalizing consent, rather than just encouraging students to obtain consent” (p. 644).

Lindgren et al. (2009)’s research highlights the need for sex education programs that develop methods of teaching students to communicate verbally and directly about their sexual desires, preferences, limits and consent in sexual situations, and use strategies “that will increase their tolerance for and comfort with doing so.” (p. 500). They show that in order to develop better sex education, it is important to acknowledge gender-based differences in perceptions of sexual intentions as men’s misperceptions of women’s sexual interest can be a precursor to sexual assault. Their findings highlight “the importance of programing that identifies direct communication as both a protective behavioural strategy and a source of pleasure and
enhancement” in sexual encounters.” (p. 500-501). This strategy may help to support a more holistic sex education that takes into account both the dangers and the pleasures of sex, connecting adolescent experiences with better communication and boundary-setting strategies.

In providing students with the tools to articulate their desires and limits in sexual encounters, teachers can help students to understand the role and importance of consent in sexual situations. A vital component of this is teaching students to respect their own and their partner’s selfhood and agency when negotiating sexual activity (Arbeit, 2014). As Arbeit explains, “[c]omponents of consent skills may include different ways in which to learn about and respond to how another person feels while also expressing one’s own feelings.” (p. 270). This includes asking for, giving or refusing consent, and accepting and respecting a partner’s repudiation. Therefore, teaching the importance of communicating consent with a partner and respecting their decision whether or not to engage in sexual activity become vital aspects of teaching about healthy sexual relationships.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed current literature on adolescent sexual behaviours, school-based sex education and consent, reviewing the research pertaining to how young people understand and negotiate consent. In most cases, sex education does not adequately reflect the sexual experiences of adolescents and fails to incorporate essential skills needed for young people to engage in healthy sexual behaviours. For adolescents attempting to navigate their own sexuality and understand their sexual experiences, sex education frequently has “no place in their realities” (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006, p. 111). However, sex education plays a role in shaping gender interactions, and gender-based differences in how we teach sex education have affected the ways in which adolescents navigate sexual situations. These gender-based differences are
also present in perceptions of sexual intent, often confusing the boundaries between what is and what is not considered sexual consent.

Sex education programming that takes into account how and why adolescents communicate consent the way they do may help to bridge the gap between the positive outcomes and negative consequences of sex. At the moment, sex education’s preoccupation with the potential negative effects of adolescent sex at the expense of positive ones means that young people may not receive a holistic sex education that aids them in developing their sexuality and sexual agency, including their ability to communicate and understand consent. As consent is now an explicit component of the updated Ontario HPE curriculum, teachers must find ways in which to conceptualize the term and communicate its meaning to students as a part of teaching healthy sexual relationships. Therefore, a link may be made between how we teach sex education and adolescents’ negotiations of understanding the concept, which can inform the ways in which we teach sexuality, sexual negotiation and sexual consent in school-based sex education programs.

As shown in this chapter, the literature on consent is dynamic and evolving, with no concrete agreements by scholars on how to define the term, many instead opting to research consent in practice, drawing meaning from sexual experiences to construct an understanding of consent as behaviour. The other main body of research looks at sex education, often focusing on what is lacking in adolescent education on sex and sexuality and how to improve the experiences of youth in school-based sex education settings. What is missing in the literature is the bridge between the two areas of research. The consent research focuses on how consent is negotiated amongst adolescents, but not whether and how it is introduced and taught in sex education. A possible reason for this gap in the literature is that consent is just now being explicitly introduced into school-based sex education programs, like the Ontario HPE curriculum. There is also greater
recognition for the role and importance of consent in developing healthy relationships and identifying sexually exploitive behaviours. Further research is needed to assess the impact this may have on students and how they interact in sexual situations.

The purpose of my own study is to learn the ways in which teachers understand consent and how they will teach it to students within sex education programing so that students are better equipped to negotiate sexual encounters, appreciate the role of consent in sexual activity and develop their own sexual agency. In the next chapter, I review the research methodology and design for my study, explaining the methodological decisions I have made as they pertain to my research questions. I also introduce the participants of the study.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction (Chapter Overview)

In this chapter, I outline my research methodology and research design, identifying the methodological decisions I made and the reasons for these choices given my research purpose and questions. I begin the chapter by providing an overview of my research approach and procedures, followed by a discussion of the instruments and process of data collection. I follow this by identifying and providing information on the participants of the study, the sampling criteria and sampling procedures. I then discuss how I analyze the data and describe current ethical issues that are relevant to the study before identifying various methodological considerations, highlighting and acknowledging the limitations and strengths of the study and the methodological decisions I have made. I conclude this chapter with a brief overview and summary of the research methodology in the context of my research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

In this research study, I employed a qualitative research approach. This consisted of a review of the relevant literature about the topic, as well as in-person, semi-structured interviews with two Ontario Health and Physical Education teachers. A central reason for choosing a qualitative approach to my topic is the nature of my research problem (Marshall, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As Marshall (1996) contends, the choice of research method depends on the research question and not on the personal preference of the researcher. The central focus of qualitative research is to better understand “human beings’ richly textured experiences and reflections about those experiences” (Jackson et al., 2007, p. 22). In this sense, qualitative researchers seek to shed light on human behaviours, perceptions and emotions as participants are able to share in-depth responses to questions about how they have constructed and understood their experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Jackson et al., 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The aim
of most quantitative research, on the other hand, is to test pre-determined theories and produce
generalizable data and results (Marshall, 1996).

According to Hammersley (2013), qualitative research can be defined as “a form of social
inquiry that tends to adopt flexible, data-driven research design, to use relatively unstructured
data, to emphasize the essential role of subjectivity in the research design, to study a small
number of naturally occurring cases in detail” (p. 12). As my research focused on teacher
perspectives from a small number of participants, the nature of my research naturally supported a
qualitative research approach. I did not wish to answer the ‘what’ questions associated with
quantitative research, but rather the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions of qualitative research to better
understand teachers’ lived experiences teaching consent (Marshall, 1996). This research study
allowed participants to describe their experiences and explain their thoughts, feelings, strategies
and perceptions when teaching consent in schools. The research problem and questions in this
study were better investigated using a qualitative interview approach rather than a quantitative
method.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

Qualitative research can use a myriad of research techniques and methods that include
data collection in the form of interviews, observations and documents (Hammersley, 2013;
Merriam, 2002). Researchers may select one method of data collection or may combine multiple
techniques in an effort to increase data yield (Marshall, 1996). The method of data collection
relies on the central purpose of the study and which technique is best suited to produce the most
useful results to examine the proposed research questions.

Interviewing is one such method that allows the researcher to generate data from
individuals utilizing structured, semi-structured or unstructured questioning formats (Jackson et
al., 2007; Merriam, 2002). Interviews as the instrument of data collection therefore allow participants to offer in-depth responses to questions about their lived experiences, perceptions, identities, knowledges and opinions (Jackson et al., 2007; Rapley, 2004). By using interviews, qualitative research recognizes “the need to allow people to speak in their own terms…to understand their [own] distinctive perspectives” (Hammersley, 2013, p. 11). As I sought to understand how Ontario Health and Physical Education teachers are using, understanding and experiencing the topic of consent in sex education, interviewing a small sample of these teachers would therefore produce the most relevant data on the subject. As best articulated by Jackson et al. (2007), “experience is key to qualitative inquiry” (p. 26). Teachers’ lived experiences could be better understood by interviewing them directly to gain greater insight into teaching consent in Ontario schools.

For the purposes of this research study, I used a semi-structured interview format. Semi-structured interviews permit the researcher to formulate a series of questions in advance of the interview, but allow for greater flexibility and responsiveness to test emerging themes and concepts (Jackson et al., 2007; Merriam, 2002). In semi-structured interviews, data analysis (more below) occurs in conjunction with data collection, allowing the researcher to make adjustments during the interview process to explore relevant issues that may arise in greater detail (Merriam, 2002). As the questions for my interview protocol relied on my own research, I may not have considered all avenues of inquiry, particularly from the perspectives of those from whom I wished to learn more. A semi-structured approach thus allowed me to deviate from my interview protocol to investigate unanticipated questions, elicit additional information and explore trends in participant responses. In addition, I conducted interviews in person on a one-on-one basis to allow me to ask more personal questions and for participants to share more in-
depth accounts of their experiences (Rapley, 2004). My interview questions were categorized by section, beginning with the participant’s background information, followed by their perspectives and understanding of consent, then their strategies and practices teaching consent in the classroom, and ending with challenges they have faced and supports they have received teaching consent. Examples of questions I included are:

- Talk me through your understanding of consent as it relates to sex education
- What has influenced your understanding of consent?
- Do you feel comfortable teaching consent?

3.3 Participants

In order to explore my research questions in detail, it was necessary to be highly selective with the study sample in order to limit the participants to those with knowledge of the topic (Horsburgh, 2002). As some participants were considered to be ‘richer’ in knowledge and experience than others, selecting these participants were more likely to provide better insight and understanding for the researcher (Marshall, 1996). Therefore, a sampling criteria must be established in order to ensure participants shared common features to yield data directly related to the central research questions of the study (Merriam, 2002).

In the subsequent subsections, I address the methodological decisions I have made with regards to establishing a sampling criteria for selecting research participants. I have also included a subsection to introduce each participant.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria. The following criteria was used to determine and select teacher participants:

1. Teachers were currently working as Health and Physical Education teachers
2. Teachers had taught consent in 2016 as part of the updated Health and Physical Education curriculum (must be teaching grades 7, 8 or 9 health and sex education)

3. Teachers had been working in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area

Qualitative research can yield useful results when only a small number of cases are studied as it allows for each case to be situated within the context of the study and analyzed in depth (Hammersley, 2013). Thus, the criteria helped to identify participants who shared similar characteristics as decisions about selecting participants was made on the basis of their ability to provide relevant data and insight that can expose commonalities in participant experiences (Horsburgh, 2002). As I studied teachers’ experiences teaching consent in Ontario schools, an important criterion required teachers to be teaching consent under the updated curriculum, where consent has now been included as a topic of study. As consent first appears in the curriculum for grade 7 and is subsequently mentioned in grades 8 and 9, and as HPE is mandatory for students up to grade 9, HPE teachers must have been teaching at least one of these grades to be teaching consent to their students.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures. As qualitative researchers seek to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of participants, it was therefore important to select a sample from which the most useful and relevant data could be gathered (Merriam, 2002). There are several different sampling methods, depending on the purpose of the research and research questions to address. In quantitative research, in order to yield results that can be generalized to wider society, sampling methods are most commonly random (Marshall, 1996). In the case of this research study, generalization was not the goal and selecting participants at random would be unlikely to generate tangible results in relation to the research questions. Instead, I employed sampling
methods more attune to qualitative research, like convenience and purposive sampling (Horsburgh, 2002).

Convenience sampling relies on selecting the most accessible subjects to participate in the study (Marshall, 1996). As I was exposed to a network of teachers and professors within the Master of Teaching program, some of my participants may have come from the contacts and connections I had already made. This could also lead to snowball sampling in which participants and contacts help to recruit additional subjects to partake in the study (Marshall, 1996). Purposive or purposeful sampling sees the researcher actively select the most productive participants for their research (Marshall, 1996). According to Horsburgh (2002), sampling decisions in qualitative research should be purposive “in that selection of participants is made on the basis of their ability to provide relevant data on the area under investigation” (p. 311). In order to conduct purposive sampling, I ensured teachers put forward for the study fit my sampling criteria to ensure the best possible data outcome was achieved. In all sampling methods, I provided my information to interested participants and contacts rather than sought their information in order to ensure that teachers were volunteering of their own volition to participate in the study, without pressure or obligation.

3.3.3 Participant bios. In this section, I introduce and provide brief background information for my participants, Michelle and Veronica. Michelle is an intermediate and senior Health and Physical Education teacher working in the Hamilton area. She has been teaching for over 30 years. This year, Michelle teaches grade 9, 10 and 11 students, but has taught from grade 7 to grade 12 in the past. This past year was the first time she explicitly taught consent within the updated curriculum. Veronica teaches intermediate students Health and Physical Education with the Halton District School Board. She has been teaching for over 20 years and currently teaches
grade 7 and 8 health. Like Michelle, 2016 marked the first time she explicitly taught about consent.

3.4 Data Analysis

Strauss and Corbin (1990) attest to the key place of data analysis in qualitative research, explaining that the procedures employed by researchers to interpret and organize data can characterize this methodology. According to Hammersley (2013), qualitative research often employs the use of verbal rather than statistical forms of data analysis to find commonalities in themes and experiences. I began the process of data analysis by transcribing each interview and coding the collected data against my research questions. From there, I identified major themes that arose across the data, noting any discrepancies that appear, while also recognizing null data and the significance this may hold in regards to my research questions.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Ethical considerations are a necessary part of the research process and ethical issues are present in any research study (Seale, 2004). As the researcher plays a central role in the research process in qualitative studies, ethical issues can arise in relation to the subjectivity of the researcher (Flick, 2009). Therefore, in order to mitigate ethical risks, it is important to establish sound ethical protocols and procedures for data collection and analysis, particularly in relation to study participants.

According to Flick (2009), interviewing as a method of data collection presents ethical risks that include confidentiality and anonymity of participants, communication and informed consent and harm reduction. In particular, participant confidentiality must be ensured by safeguarding participant information and anonymity. In addition, the research study should be based on informed consent in which participants have agreed to partake in the study on the basis
of the information that has been shared with them by the researcher (Flick, 2009). As Flick explains, “the research should avoid harming participants, including not invading their privacy and not deceiving them about the research’s aims” (p. 37).

As this study centered on consent and sex education, there was a small risk that some participants may have felt uncomfortable about the subject matter or discussing it for the purposes of this study. However, I believed this risk to be minor as those who meet the criteria for participation have taught sex education to students and have therefore been exposed to these types of conversations. Furthermore, all participants may have chosen not to answer any questions they were uncomfortable with and were able to withdraw their participation at any time. This had been made clear in the consent form and at the start of the interview. Member-checking assists the researcher to validate “qualitative research findings, as themes and descriptions are taken back to participants to determine whether or not participants feel they are accurate” (Jackson et al., 2009, p. 26; italics in original).

Teacher confidentiality throughout the research process was safeguarded in several ways. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym as well as any other names the participant may have mentioned during the course of the interview. All audio-recordings and transcripts were stored on a decrypted, password protected USB and will be destroyed after five years. Participants had been asked to review and sign a consent letter (Appendix A), which they were sent in advance of the interview, consenting to the interview and allowing it to be recorded.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

As this research study was small in scope, my findings could not be generalized to society at large as it relied on a limited number of participants offering personal accounts of their experiences (Jackson et al., 2007). However, as previously stated, the goal of this research did
not lie in its generalizability, but rather the ability to provide insight into the lived experiences of a small group of Ontario teachers, allowing for a more in-depth analysis of the data generated. Indeed, according to Marshall (1996), a strength of qualitative research lies in its transferability and improving understandings of complex human issues rather than the generalizability of results. This study sought to illuminate one topic in greater detail, but as interviews with a small number of teachers were the only sources of data collection, it does not profess to represent all teacher experiences. Rather, the participants in this study were able to share their own stories, allowing their voices and experiences to have meaning and be heard.

In qualitative research, “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis” and as such, plays a central role in the research process (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). Therefore, there is no illusion of objectivity and the researcher may have biases that influence the study (Merriam, 2002). According to Horsburgh (2002), reflexivity is important in qualitative research as it requires the researcher to actively acknowledge their role and impact on the research and interpretation of the data collected. In this regard, the researcher identifies and monitors the ways in which their own subjectivities may influence the data throughout the research process, which can lead to enhanced safeguards for trustworthiness and accountability (Jackson et al., 2007). Because the researcher is an integral and inseparable part of the research process, there can be a danger of the researcher becoming a participant themselves (Seale, 2004). In order to better mitigate this risk, interviews were brief, each confined to a roughly 60 minute period, at a determined time and location outside of the participant’s school life.

3.7 Conclusion (Brief Overview and Preview)

In this chapter, I clarified the research methodology to be employed in this research study, in relation to the research problem and questions. I began by discussing the research
approach and procedure, in particular, the meaning of qualitative research, the choice to use a qualitative research method as opposed to a quantitative method and the differences between the two approaches. I followed this by reviewing the instruments of data collection, in which interviewing will be the main method. I then described the role interviews can play in the qualitative research process and the reasons for using semi-structured interviewing techniques in this research. Next, I identified the participants of this study and introduced the criteria for selecting participants and what sampling procedures I would use. I explained the importance of sampling in qualitative research and why this research will use a combination of convenience and purposive sampling to ensure the most fruitful data is obtained in relation to the research questions. I then proceeded to explain the ways in which the data will be analyzed, which involves transcribing the interviews to identify common themes and patterns that emerge in the data. Ethical issues including participant anonymity and confidentiality, informed consent, and the right to withdraw, as well as secure data storage, were considered. Ethical protocols and procedures were reviewed to highlight the risks associated with this research study and the ways in which these risks have been identified and mitigated where possible. To conclude, I discussed the methodological limitations and strengths of this research study. In the following chapter, I report the findings of my research.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In the first chapter, I introduced my research problem and presented my central research question: how are HPE teachers using, understanding and experiencing the topic of consent in Ontario schools? In Chapter Two, I reviewed the literature on adolescent sexuality, sex education and consent, focusing on what current research has recommended for consent-based sex education, and then in Chapter Three, I presented the merits of qualitative research and outlined the research methodology and research design of my study.

In this chapter, I share and discuss the findings of my analysis of the interviews I conducted with two intermediate HPE teachers, Michelle and Veronica, and in particular, their experiences with and perceptions of teaching consent within the framework of the updated Ontario HPE curriculum. Through the data analysis, trends emerged that highlight connections between teacher practice and current research. These findings are organized into four central themes:

1. Recognition of the importance of teaching consent,
2. Teacher understandings of consent,
3. Significance of student gender in teaching consent, and
4. The importance of student voice

I begin each section by first introducing and describing each theme, then I present the data, followed by situating the findings within the context of the literature reviewed in chapter two. I conclude this chapter by summarizing my findings and offering recommendations for next steps based on the data presented.

4.1 Recognition of the Importance of Teaching Consent
The ways that teachers teach consent are influenced by their perceptions of the importance of consent and comprehensive sex education in students’ lives beyond the classroom, despite the controversy surrounding the updated curriculum. This theme focuses on how teachers articulated their belief in the role consent plays in healthy relationships and how this informed their teaching practice. Michelle and Veronica both understood their unique role in providing their students with access to information about consent and how incomplete or inadequate information could adversely affect students’ lives and future relationships. In addition, due to the controversy surrounding the updated HPE curriculum, these teachers felt they had a duty to educate students despite any pushback they may have encountered, articulating their desire to ensure students received adequate information about consent.

In the interviews, both Michelle and Veronica continuously articulated their belief in the importance of consent in the sexual experiences of their students beyond the classroom and why they felt it was vital for them to teach it well. Michelle stated that she recognized how important sexual health is for teenagers and how they should be properly equipped with reliable information to help them navigate their sexuality:

sexual health is a huge part of life and enjoying sexual activity is a huge part of life so if you make it, like matter of fact, this is the way it's going to be, this is what life is about…

My feeling is grade 9 might be the only time they take health so I try to cram as much information in them because there's so much they need to know about everything and we can't do it in one year, so I try to give them as much information as I can.

Michelle realized the importance of teaching consent to her grade 9 students as it might be the only time they are introduced to it. She did her best to ensure they received as much information as she could give them in the short amount of time she had.
Veronica too shared her thoughts about how important consent and sex education are to students’ wellbeing. She explained that “I think consent [is] so good because it empowers the kids who maybe were less likely to … stand up for what they felt.” When asked what had been her biggest challenge in teaching consent, Veronica responded that she was concerned students were not being taught competently:

My biggest personal challenge is my fear that not everybody's doing it well...Yeah, I think I am doing a really good job and I'm giving kids an opportunity to really investigate what it means to them and having great conversations, but it worries me when people brush it under the carpet or forget to get it done, or leave it too late…it needs to be a priority. It's a really big deal.

Veronica discussed how teaching students about consent can empower them in not only sexual relationships, but all relationships by giving them the tools to recognize coercion and the ability to articulate their needs and desires. Her greatest challenge was not how she taught consent, but how other teachers were teaching it because she understood how important it was for students to be well-educated about the meaning and use of the term in relationships. If another teacher was teaching it poorly, it could have a direct impact on the lives of students beyond the classroom.

Veronica shared her own experiences of having students come to her health classroom without the foundational knowledge they should have acquired in previous grades. She explained that, to her, this was an injustice to students who had questions about their bodies and sexual relationships that had gone unanswered by former HPE teachers; as a result, many students were left feeling ashamed and ill-prepared to discuss important concepts like consent. Indeed, her experiences and those of her students are not unique as Lindgren et al. (2009) reported that
students in their interview study felt they were given insufficient sex education to navigate sexual relationships outside their school contexts.

With the controversy surrounding the release of the updated Ontario curriculum, teachers described their perceived duty to ensure students had a comprehensive understanding of the consent. Indeed, they both described the controversy as providing them with greater incentive to ensure students were taught sex education well. For instance, Veronica explained, “we actually quickly identified…which the most disconcerting topics for the public were and in what grades and how to make sure they were addressed.” In spite of the controversy, she recognized how important sexual health education was and wanted to ensure that topics like consent were covered. Veronica’s sentiments align with current research on the importance of consent as a cornerstone of healthy relationships. Brunk et al. (2008), in their study of sex education programming in the Waterloo region for grade 7 and 8 girls, found that consent plays a pivotal role in the development of healthy sexual relationships. McKay et al. (2014) found that although the majority of Ontario parents do indeed support comprehensive school-based sex education, the controversy nonetheless has affected teachers’ ability to teach sexual health. By recognizing the importance of sex education and concepts like consent for their students, both Michelle and Veronica were galvanized to ensure they were teaching to the best of their ability, despite the controversy.

Teachers’ recognition of the importance of consent to their students’ lives outside the classroom were reflected in their teaching practices and were evident throughout the interviews in the ways in which they articulate their experiences and understandings of consent. Teachers saw the importance of consent as a life skill, not just within the context of the curriculum and thus a concept that would impact students beyond the classroom. This recognition of consent’s
importance in healthy relationships follows from current research linking consent to positive outcomes for adolescents in sexual situations. Teachers recognized their ability to ensure students were properly informed about the meaning of consent, a role they considered necessary to ensure healthy sexual relationships for their students beyond the classroom. As Veronica alluded, not all teachers view consent and sex education this way and, given what McKay et al. (2014) found about parent attitudes toward the updated curriculum, some teachers may have been adversely affected by the controversy. This exposes a dilemma in how students are being taught important concepts like consent and the effect it may have on students when sex education is not taught well. Regardless of the controversy, these teachers understood the importance of teaching consent comprehensively to their students and the impact consent and sex education can have on students’ future sexual relationships.

4.2 Teacher Understandings of Consent

Teachers’ own understandings of consent played a role in how they reportedly used the term in the classroom. In particular, teachers’ own notions of consent affected the ways in which they taught the concept to students. In addition, teachers’ individual views of the updated curriculum and its expectations for student learning about concepts like consent played a role in how teachers taught consent to students. Teachers used the curriculum and sought out additional resources to help solidify their own understanding of consent and conceptualize it in terms that could be explained to students. Teachers’ interpretations of consent were thus affected by their own previous knowledge about the term, where and how they accessed information and how they understood consent within the context of the updated curriculum.

In their interviews, each teacher discussed their own understanding of consent and how the updated curriculum has had an effect on their teaching practices. Both Michelle and Veronica
explained that although they had taught students implicitly and indirectly about consent in the past, its inclusion in the 2015 curriculum update meant it was the first time they were each explicitly teaching the concept, something they both regarded favourably. They explained that although they had preconceptions about the meaning of consent and taught about healthy relationships in the past, they each needed to use additional resources to help them translate their understandings of consent and the curriculum’s expectations to students now that they were expected to teach the concept explicitly.

When questioned about what influenced her understanding of consent, Veronica answered that the curriculum played a role in how she understood it. And when asked whether her understanding of consent aligned with the curriculum, she replied that “Yeah, actually I quite like it. There's nothing in the health curriculum that I don't feel comfortable with.” She further explained that she used the curriculum as a starting point to help her develop a comprehensive understanding of consent in line with curriculum expectations and found it to be a useful tool in her lesson planning. She did, however, need to use additional resources to help her to translate that understanding to students. She explained that she wanted to ensure it would be clear to students and ensure she was prepared for any questions they may have had about the concept.

Michelle, on the other hand, found the updated curriculum to be lacking in detail and she was unsure what the expectations were for teaching consent. Indeed, when asked how she felt about consent being mentioned only within a bracket under specific expectations for healthy relationships, she responded that she felt “the whole curriculum is a bracket”. This highlights her view that the curriculum did not give her clear expectations for teaching consent and thus she struggled with what she needed to cover specifically. She further supported this argument by explaining that her biggest challenge had been interpreting the curriculum:
[The b]iggest challenge [is] ... knowing exactly what the expectations are. You know, they're there generally but what does the Ontario Government and [Ministry of] Education really want them [students] to get? I mean we've kind of guessed, but there's no pre-script for exactly what...they're looking for and you know, did we hit the mark or you know, are we grasping at straws.

Michelle needed to seek additional resources in order to conceptualize consent in a manner that students could understand and to ensure she was ‘ticking all the boxes’ required in the curriculum. She explained that she could not rely on her own understanding of consent alone as she needed help to design lessons that she felt would bridge the gap between her own understanding and the curriculum expectations. As mentioned in the previous section, Michelle wanted to ensure she was teaching consent well and thus felt she required additional support to do so.

In sum, both Michelle and Veronica shared their views of the curriculum and how it shaped their understanding of consent. For Veronica, it was helpful and supported her views of consent education, but for Michelle, it was hindrance, making it more difficult for her to articulate her understanding of consent as it was presented in the curriculum. Both Michelle and Veronica sought out materials and resources to help them develop a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of consent and how they can best present the concept to students in the classroom. For Michelle in particular, these resources supported her teaching practice by helping her to make connections between her understanding of consent and the specific expectations laid out in the curriculum. Each indicated that accessing resources was an important part of their preparation for teaching consent that helped them to articulate the concept in student-friendly language.
As there is little current research on the updated curriculum, it will be some time before its effects on students and teachers are known, but Michelle’s feelings in particular highlight research about teachers’ feelings of discomfort and ill-preparedness regarding the teaching of sex education that were also shared by several HPE teachers interviewed in Herold and Benson’s (1979) early study. Furthermore, in their study of student satisfaction with school-based sex education, Meaney et al. (2009) found that teachers lacked adequate training and the confidence in the materials being taught. Michelle’s experiences trying to navigate the expectations of the curriculum call attention to this issue of teacher comfort and confidence in teaching consent. Although she believed she had a solid understanding of the concept, the way in which it was presented in the curriculum caused her discomfort in teaching it to students. Her struggles highlight an area in which additional supports for teachers may be required to ensure they are better prepared and more comfortable with the content they are expected to teach.

4.3 Significance of Student Gender in Teaching Consent

Teachers recognize the significance of student gender in teaching consent and how gender influenced their teaching practices. Both teachers discussed gender at length in their interviews and shared their thoughts about how gender may play a role in students’ understanding of consent. This theme section centres on the ways in which teachers understood gender to be significant in their teaching of consent, albeit in different ways. Connections are made with the literature on consent education and the ways in which teaching consent by gender has been found in the research to have negative effects on students’ understanding of the term, particularly by reinforcing gender stereotypes of whose responsibility it is to give and get consent. The connections to research will be further discussed later in this section.
How each teacher conceptualized consent by gender is important in understanding their teaching practices and what teaching consent looks like in their classrooms. Teachers recognized that the perception of gender binary can have a role in how consent is taught in the classroom. Each teacher approached teaching consent differently, with Michelle believing that gender affected how students understood consent, whereas Veronica expressed her belief that students should not be taught consent on the basis of gender, and that consent education should be taught the same to all students as it is everyone’s responsibility to ensure consent, regardless of gender identity or relationship configuration.

Michelle believed consent education should be separated by gender, explaining that conversations needed to be framed differently by gender to ensure a better understanding. For instance, when asked whether her lessons differed depending on students' gender identities, she responded that yes, she taught the girls differently than the boys:

I think with boys you need to go more black and white, be straight up. Girls, you have to talk about the feelings, right, which makes sense cause that's how we operate. But boys are black and white. If she says, if it's consent then it's yes. If she's not said yes and agreed then it's definitely a no.

She made a distinction between genders and their ability to conceptualize the meaning of consent. She believed that consent education necessarily required a focus on what the boys understood and therefore boys required additional attention to ensure their understanding.

Veronica took a divergent approach to teaching consent and in particular the responsibility each individual has in negotiating consent with a sexual partner. When asked the same question as Michelle, Veronica responded very differently:
No, no I think that it doesn't matter and one of the conversation activities we did last year, a couple of the scenarios have gender neutral names like Chris or Terry and many of the students just went ahead with it making assumptions that one was male and one was female and a few of the kids came to me and said well, you know, are these two girls or two boys or is it...I said does it matter? And that was our conversation. It doesn't matter what your identity is having to do with consent. And it doesn't matter who's pressuring whom, it just matters that there is unilateral consent.

Veronica used the activity to highlight to her students that each individual has a role to play in ensuring consent, that it is not one person’s responsibility over the other. She went on to say, “I think that activity really opens their mind and the opportunity to say, well it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter your gender identity, it doesn't matter your sexual preference, it just matters that you're respectful of each other.” She wanted students to recognize that gender should not determine what consent looks like, but rather every person has the responsibility to seek out and ensure consent.

The differences in the way that Michelle and Veronica taught consent are highlighted in their view of how gender influences understandings of consent. For Michelle, her lessons were framed in a way that caters to her perceptions of gender difference, whereas for Veronica, gender explicitly did not play a role in how she taught consent. For both teachers, gender is an important aspect of their teaching, but they conceptualize the role of gender in students’ understanding of consent very differently. This presents an interesting tension in the ways in which consent is taught in schools and how this can effect students, as shown in the literature.

The perception that gender can affect how consent is taught is documented in current research that highlights the dangers of teaching consent differently by gender and the impact this
can have on students. In the literature on consent education, research (Bay-Cheng et al., 2011; Connell, 2005; Gray, 2015; Meaney et al., 2009) has shown that teachers continue to teach consent by gender, perpetuating gender stereotypes about who is responsible for ensuring consent. For example, in her interview study of university students, Gray (2015) found that sex education continues to be divided along gender lines and that boys and girls are taught consent very differently, with expectations for requesting and receiving consent falling to men and accepting and giving consent falling to women. The ways in which consent is framed continues to perpetuate views of women as the gatekeepers and men as the instigators of sex, where men are seen to be the ones required to ask for sexual consent and women to grant or deny it (Gray, 2015). This can have a significant impact on what consent looks like in practice and the ways in which consent is conceptualized by young people.

Michelle appears to fall into this ‘trap’ of assuming consent must be taught differently by gender to ensure understanding and thus inadvertently frames consent within this context. By separating consent by gender, she may be helping to reinforce the gender stereotypes about whose responsibility it is to seek and ensure consent. Veronica, on the other hand, explains consent to students as it is everyone’s responsibility, regardless of gender, to ensure consent. Her teaching practices may then help to destabilize these gendered stereotypes pervasive in sex education, where she teaches. The question still remains why teachers like Michelle continue to conceptualize consent differently by gender and how these practices can be changed to ensure consent is taught without this gender divide.

4.4 The Importance of Student Voice

Teachers recognize the importance of student voice in their classrooms, which influenced how they taught consent. Teachers valued their students’ opinions and experiences, using student
voice to shape their lessons on consent. Both Michelle and Veronica recognized the importance of having a classroom open to discussion, and valued the voices of their students in their teaching practices. Each teacher used student voice to assess students on their knowledge and understanding of consent by using formative assessment in the form of scenarios and role playing, conversations and discussions. This method of assessment allowed teachers to tap into student understandings of consent by enabling students to showcase their knowledge in various forms. In addition, teachers allowed students to direct lessons by permitting questions and discussions centred on what students wanted to know. They both highlighted the importance of knowing your students when teaching sex education more broadly and how this can affect how they taught consent.

When asked about assessment, both teachers explained that they used role-playing, scenarios and discussions to evaluate students’ understanding of consent. They wanted students to not just understand consent, but to recognize it and experience it. As articulated by Michelle, she wanted her students to be able to “speak the language of consent”. Veronica too wanted students to experience consent in practice by creating conversations about what it would look like to deny consent in various situations. She explained:

I really think the building of the conversation and how to deny consent is really impactful for grade 7. How do you say no in a reasonable way… You need to think how would somebody actually respond, what would you actually say. And so they get scenarios like you're with your boyfriend of a few months and there's been drinking involved and things are getting you know hot and heavy. How do you say no and it’s really interesting what they came up with. I found that group really interesting because they used lines that I
thought wow you know what, a kid would say that, like the alcohol's going to make it feel better, those kinds of things and, but they had to build the way, how do you say no.

Veronica wanted students to practice denying consent because she felt it was vital for students to experience negotiating consent rather than writing a test or using another form of assessment to evaluate their understanding. She wished her students to be able to build conversation, recognize power dynamics and coercion in practice. She explained she wanted students to “build the pressure side so that they would recognize if they're being pressured.” In this way, they are able to use the concept of consent in practice to gain insight into what conversations about consent might look like. Both teachers looked for how students used consent in conversation as a means of assessing their understanding of the term and how it is used in sexual situations. They each wanted to ensure students gained a thorough understanding of the concept and could assess this understanding through the various forms of assessment they used in their classrooms, including conversations and role-playing scenarios.

The research supports teachers’ use of discussions and role-playing to teach consent. In particular, in a study of high school students in New Zealand, Abel and Fitzgerald (2006) found that relationship skills are frequently not taught as a part of consent education and are thus often inadequately developed in adolescents. In particular, their study indicated that assertiveness, negotiation and communication skills are important in setting sexual boundaries but are often not given enough of a focus in sex education. Brunk et al. (2008) found similar results in their study of intermediate girls in Waterloo; in particular, the development of these relationship skills helps adolescents to articulate their expectations, negotiate their sexual experiences and limits, and assert their agency in sexual situations. Veronica’s use of direct conversations to allow students to practice denying consent converges with Lindgren et al.’s (2009) findings that direct
communication can play a role in positive sexual experiences and should therefore be taught in schools.

By using role-playing, scenarios and discussions to assess students on their understanding of consent, teachers can develop these relationship skills in students and allow them to practice these interactions in the classroom. Both Michelle and Veronica found these strategies to be useful in allowing students to express their understanding of consent, which is supported by the research that has found this to be lacking in many sex education programs. In addition, these assessment tools helped students to develop their sexual agency and other vital relationship skills by allowing them to role play what giving or denying consent may look like in practice.

4.4.1 The importance of creating a safe classroom for student voice to be heard. As teachers value student voice in their classrooms, they understand the necessity of creating safe spaces in the classroom where student voice can be heard. Teachers recognized the importance of creating a safe classroom space where students could ask questions and direct lessons by articulating what they wished to know more about. Michelle explained that she often ‘went with the flow’ when students brought questions into the classroom or wanted to discuss something in particular that they might have continued to struggle with. She described what can occur when teaching consent:

I find in sex ed classes that you kind of go with the flow, right? Introduce the topic like consent, but it can take you through the myriad of topics because they're interested and they ask questions and I mean often, that's where my classes will go. We'll start with a main topic, but it will end up way off topic because something that come up that's important.
She allowed students to direct the conversation and spend more time on topics and issues they had questions about. By bringing in student voice into her classroom, Michelle felt she was able to ensure students gained a greater understanding by spending more time on specific concepts when required.

Veronica too had similar experiences where students directed the conversations her class. She deemed it important to allow for student voice because of what students can bring to the discussions. In one such experience she shared, Veronica described a conversation she had with students about gender identity. One of her students was questioning their gender identity and brought some valuable insights into their discussions in the classroom; she said, “I thought that was interesting, that that person could bring that to the conversation. It was valuable and... it was a great conversation.” Veronica saw the value in allowing students to share their own experiences in the classroom and what learning opportunities could come out of these moments.

By allowing students to share their experiences, direct their learning and ask additional questions, teachers endeavour to let students share their voice in the classroom. This converges with similar findings made by Cameron-Lewis and Allen (2013) in their qualitative research on teaching pleasure and danger in sex education. They found that students’ voices and experiences were essential in the classroom to ensure sex education was both relevant and useful to adolescents. Both Michelle and Veronica recognized the importance of allowing student voices in their classrooms as a means of assessing student understandings of consent. In addition, by bringing in student questions and discussions, teachers were able to allow students to share their own insights and experiences, making consent education more relevant to them. Indeed, as Cameron-Lewis and Allen found, if teachers are not allowing student experiences and voices into the classroom, sex education does not connect with students’ lives.
4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the four main themes that arose from my analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with two intermediate HPE teachers about their experiences teaching consent within the updated Ontario curriculum. The first theme centred on teachers’ recognition of the importance of consent in the lives of students beyond the classroom. Teachers shared their beliefs that consent was a vital component of healthy relationships and thus was important for students to thoroughly understand. They discussed how the controversy surrounding the curriculum update emboldened them to ensure students were given comprehensive consent and sex education. These findings highlighted issues with the quality of consent education as many teachers are not teaching students the necessary skills to understand healthy relationships beyond the classroom. Indeed, the research highlights that many teachers do not conceptualize consent and sex education the way Michelle and Veronica do and this may have adverse effects on how students understand consent.

The next theme shared findings of how teachers understand consent, and how they use their understandings of consent from the curriculum and the resources they access to make it available to students. Teachers used the curriculum to bolster their understanding of consent and accessed additional resources when necessary. Unlike Veronica, who found the curriculum to be clear, Michelle struggled to understand the specific expectations and what exactly she should be teaching students. Her struggles understanding the curriculum expectations converged with the literature regarding teachers’ discomfort and uncertainty teaching sex education. These findings suggest more support and additional resources may be required to assist teachers in understanding consent in the curriculum and their expectations for teaching students.
The third theme in this chapter centred on teachers’ recognition of the significance of gender when teaching consent. Each teacher conceptualized the role of gender in their teaching practice differently, with Michelle believing it necessary to frame lessons on consent by gender. Veronica, on the other hand, saw consent education to be the same, regardless of the gender of her students and taught consent by ensuring students understood it was everyone’s responsibility to get and give consent. The literature highlighted the dangers in teaching consent separately by gender and how these practices may reinforce gender stereotypes and harmful practices for students. Veronica’s way of teaching consent appears to be a recommendation in the research about the ways in which consent education should be. Why teachers like Michelle, who recognize the importance of teaching consent, but continue to teach it along gender lines, potentially negatively affecting students’ understanding of the concept, is not explained in the research. What can be concluded from this theme is that teaching consent the way Veronica does, regardless of gender, students may better understand their roles and responsibilities in giving and getting consent in future sexual relationships.

In the final theme, I discussed the ways in which teachers allowed student voices and experiences into their classroom as a means of assessing student understandings of consent. Teachers used anecdotal assessment strategies like role-playing and discussions to monitor students’ language and ensure they were understanding what consent might look like in practice. In addition, teachers allowed students to direct their learning by creating environments in which students could ask questions, seek clarification on issues and share their experiences and opinions with their classmates. Research has shown that by allowing student voices into sex education, teachers are able to make discussions more relevant to their students and thus students gain greater understanding of important issues and concepts like consent.
The experiences and practices shared by Michelle and Veronica in this study are a first step to better understanding how teachers are using, understanding, and experiencing consent in the classroom. These teachers took it upon themselves to be informed about how to teach consent and translate their understanding into student-friendly language, recognizing the role consent plays in the lives of students beyond the classroom. Consent can be a difficult and complex concept to teach and to understand and teachers can struggle with the expectations for teaching it within the updated curriculum. Yet, these teachers were committed to teaching consent well and thus designed lesson plans to ensure students were given the best opportunities to learn it and use it in situations that mimicked real life. They welcomed student voice into their classrooms and used it to assess students’ understanding of consent. From their experiences and practices, implications can be gleaned that shed light on teacher experiences teaching consent within the updated curriculum. In the final chapter, I discuss the implications of these findings and make recommendations for teacher practice, offering potential avenues for further research.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.0 Chapter Introduction

In the previous chapters, I introduced the topic of consent in the updated Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum (Ontario, 2015a; 2015b); reviewed the relevant literature in the areas pertaining to adolescent sexual behaviours, school-based sex education and consent; and presented my research methodology and my findings. In this final chapter, I will discuss the significance of my findings and the implications for both the educational community broadly and for my own teaching practice. I will begin the chapter by detailing my findings from Chapter Four and their significance. I will then outline the implications of these findings for the educational community and the impact they might have for teachers and other stakeholders. In addition, I will provide implications for myself as a teacher and a researcher and the ways in which my findings might shape my teaching. From there, I will set out some recommendations based on the findings and some areas for future research before concluding the chapter.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

I interviewed two intermediate HPE teachers about the ways in which they understand consent and how they operationalize it in the classroom. In the process of conducting these interviews and analyzing my data, trends emerged between the research and teaching practice that I organized into four major themes. These themes included teachers’ recognition of the importance of teaching consent; teacher understandings of consent; the perceived significance of student gender in teaching consent; and the perceived importance of student voice.

The first major themes, teachers’ recognition of the importance of teaching consent and teacher understandings of consent, centred on the importance of being invested in teaching comprehensive sex education and how important it is for students’ lives beyond the classroom.
Michelle and Veronica shared their experiences and difficulties understanding the meaning of consent and the expectations for teaching it within the updated HPE curriculum. This is a significant finding because consent can be a difficult and complex concept to teach and to understand and the teachers in this study struggled with the expectations for teaching it within the updated curriculum, often drawing on their previous knowledge about the term and additional information to support their understanding. Nonetheless, the teachers I interviewed were committed to teaching consent well and thus designed lesson plans to ensure students were given the best opportunities to learn about it and use it in situations that mimicked real life. They recognized the controversy surrounding the teaching of consent and sex education more broadly and felt they had a duty to their students to provide them with the tools to navigate their sexual agency and gain greater understanding of important concepts like consent.

The third theme, which involved the perceived significance of student gender in teaching consent, highlighted the ways in which these teachers viewed gender as playing a role in how students understood consent and thus how teachers might teach consent differently by gender. Although Veronica did not teach consent differently by gender and stated that it should not affect how consent is taught, Michelle believed that gender can influence how students understand consent, and thus reportedly taught the topic differently according to students’ gender. The literature reviewed highlights the dangers of teaching consent differently by gender and how it can be harmful to students, reinforcing gender stereotypes about whose responsibility it is to seek and confirm consent. By framing consent differently by gender, Michelle may be reinforcing these gender stereotypes, whereas Veronica, on the other hand, may be disrupting them in her teaching by explaining that it is everyone’s responsibility, regardless of gender, to ensure consent.
The final theme centred on the perceived importance of student voice in teaching consent and how it reportedly influenced the way in which Veronica and Michelle taught consent. These teachers valued their students’ contributions in their classroom and reportedly used student voice to assess student understanding of consent. The use of student voice in the classroom reportedly helped teachers to teach students vital relationship skills and allow them to experience what consent looks like in practice. This is a significant finding because current research highlights the importance of these skills and how many students are not taught them in consent education.

The findings from my data analysis of the interviews with Michelle and Veronica highlight the ways in which these teachers conceptualized consent and reportedly operationalized it in their classroom settings. These findings highlight connections between consent teaching in practice and in research and lead to implications for teaching practice and additional research that are explored in greater depth in the sections that follow.

5.2 Implications

Although this was a small-scale qualitative research study focusing on the experiences of two teachers in teaching consent within the updated HPE curriculum, several implications can be gleaned from the findings that could influence teaching practice. In the first subsection, I will detail the implications of my findings on the educational community broadly, highlighting how my findings might affect key stakeholders in the education system. In the following subsection, I will reflect on how these findings might influence my own teaching and play a role in how I might teach consent and sex education in future as an aspiring HPE teacher.

5.2.1 Broad implications: The educational community. There are several broad implications of my findings that may affect key stakeholders within the educational community. The implications of these findings for intermediate HPE teachers who teach consent will be
explored as well as implications for students, other school staff and administrators within schools.

My findings highlight the difficulties teachers face in understanding consent and translating the meaning of consent into language their students can understand. HPE teachers may not have adequate resources, training or support in teaching consent and sex education within the updated curriculum. In addition, these teachers may not be aware of what resources they can access and where to find them, hindering their ability to better understand consent and teach it to students. With the release of the new intermediate HPE curriculum, teachers are expected to teach consent for the first time, and may struggle to scaffold their lessons to ensure adequate student understanding. However, my findings also imply that HPE teachers recognize the importance of teaching consent in the wake of the controversy surrounding it in Ontario, and therefore seek ways to better teach it to students, despite the barriers they may face.

The implications of these findings for students highlight the inequity of teaching consent and how students may be affected by one teacher’s views of gender in understanding consent. The way in which one teacher approaches the subject of consent differently by gender might have an impact on the ways in which students understand the roles and responsibilities of each partner in sexual relationships, reinforcing gender stereotypes about who is responsible for giving and getting consent in sexual situations. Students may be adversely affected by how a teacher perceives gender in the teaching of consent and transmits this perception of consent to students.

The ways in which HPE teachers teach consent may have implications for school culture and may be experienced not only by students, but by other school staff. Reinforcing gender stereotypes in teaching consent in sex education may have an adverse effect on the interactions
between intermediate students, which can affect classroom dynamics, encounters between students outside the classroom, and student behaviour at school events. The ways in which students interact with each other in school, particularly the dynamics between male and female students who may be taught differently about their roles and responsibilities in sexual activity, may affect school staff and students as a whole.

5.2.2 Narrow implications: My professional identity and practice. The findings in this study have narrow implications for my own teaching practice and how I may teach consent in the future. Returning to my own experiences with sex and consent education, I recognize the importance including both the positive and negative outcomes of sex in my teaching. Teaching students about consent should be empowering to them, allowing them to safely explore their sexual agency and understand healthy sexual relationships. I commit to ensuring I am educating myself about the meaning of consent, accessing resources to support my teaching, and improving my understanding of the expectations for teaching consent in the updated curriculum. I wish to inform my teaching practice with research that helps me to avoid the potentially negative outcomes of teaching consent differently by gender and reinforcing gender stereotypes. Instead, I wish to dismantle these stereotypes and heteronormativity in sex education to ensure I am teaching consent and sex education equitably. In doing so, I seek to create safe spaces in my classroom where student voice is welcome and encouraged and students are free to explore the meaning of sexuality and consent in positive ways.

These findings have illuminated the importance of sharing knowledge, research and resources with other teachers and having open discussions about how best to teach consent comprehensively to students. I believe that good teaching involves educating yourself, accessing resources, doing the research to ensure you are teaching consent well to your students,
recognizing your limitations and asking for help and support when you need it. The teacher can play a vital role in either dispelling or reinforcing gender stereotypes in teaching consent. Teaching consent is important in helping students to gain greater agency in sexual relationships by understanding their roles and responsibilities and recognizing healthy and unhealthy relationships. Consent is central in healthy sexual relationships and teachers are the cornerstone of transmitting the meaning of consent and its role in sexual relationships to students. I commit to taking this role seriously and to continually working to improve my teaching of consent and sex education to ensure my students are given the tools and are empowered to take agency over their own sexual choices.

5.3 Recommendations

The implications of my findings highlight several areas where more could be done in teaching consent and sex education more broadly, and what various stakeholders can do to ensure positive outcomes for teaching the concept to students for the first time. These recommendations for policy and practice center on teacher education and training, teachers, administrators, school boards and the Ontario Ministry of Education, and what these stakeholders can do in both the short and long term to address some of the implications of the findings as the updated HPE curriculum enters its second year.

Teacher education programs should ensure they are providing HPE teacher candidates with the tools to comprehensively teach sex education and understand the meaning of consent in ways that can be taught to students. These teacher candidates should have access to resources that help them to be more knowledgeable HPE teachers upon graduation and allow them to explore the expectations for teaching consent laid out in the updated curriculum. From my own experiences as an HPE teacher candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, only a
very small fraction of time has been allocated for learning how to best teach sex education and I often find myself thinking how unprepared myself and my classmates are to teach consent to students. This recommendation can be implemented in the short term by allocating additional teaching hours to better preparing HPE teacher candidates to teach sex education and consent.

Teachers must seek out resources and solidify their understanding of consent in ways they can teach it to students. Organizations like the Ontario Physical and Health Educators Association (OPHEA) are currently developing resources and lesson plans to support HPE teachers as they teach the updated curriculum. However, teachers must actively search for these resources and share them amongst colleagues. In addition, some teachers who are not HPE specialists may be required to teach consent and sex education and should ensure they are knowledgeable in the concept of consent, requiring them to reach out to colleagues and organizations like OPHEA to access resources and supports. These teachers and even seasoned HPE teachers must ensure they are prepared to teach consent. The controversy that still surrounds the updated curriculum also requires teachers to recognize the importance of teaching consent to students and not shy away from teaching sex education effectively.

Administrators and school boards must ensure that teacher training is a priority and allocate money and time to allow teachers to access professional development opportunities and resources. In addition, administrators and school boards should provide access to speakers and specialists to come to their schools to speak to students or hold assemblies where consent can be discussed. Administrators in particular play a role in school culture and environment and must allow a forum for such discussions to take place. These recommendations can be implemented in the short term and should continue each school year to ensure teachers have access to professional development opportunities and experts in consent and sex education.
The Ontario Ministry of Education has a responsibility to continue to include consent in the HPE curriculum and provide better expectations for student understanding. In the short term, the Ministry can ensure it is developing supporting resources to the curriculum to help teacher understanding and support comprehensive sex education. In the long term, the Ministry can assess the potential gaps that may exist in the updated curriculum and determine what can be done better, ensuring the next curriculum update provides comprehensive expectations for students, as well as opportunities for teachers to teach students about both the positive and negative outcomes of sex. The Ministry must continue to develop consent education within the curriculum, despite the controversy surrounding the latest HPE curriculum update to ensure students are given access to concepts like consent.

5.4 Areas for Future Research

Throughout this study, I found several gaps in research about how teachers experience sex education, how they understand and teach consent and what barriers and supports teachers might face in teaching consent. Much of the research on consent and sex education focuses on the experiences of students and on instances where consent was taught poorly. This research study instead looked at teacher perspectives and experiences teaching consent in the context of the updated Ontario HPE curriculum. Additional research is required to better understand the experiences of teachers and how their perceptions about consent and sex education shape teaching practice.

Research is also needed to assess the impact of teaching consent for the first time within the updated curriculum and best practices for ensuring the concept is taught comprehensively, particularly when students have not been scaffolded to facilitate their understanding. Connections for research can also be made between how comprehensive consent education
impacts sexual assault rates and whether any correlations can be made between teaching consent and the reduction of instances of sexual assault, particularly amongst adolescents.

This study could be expanded in both size and scope to encompass the practices of Ontario teachers and their experiences teaching consent within the updated curriculum, taking into account other variables such as teacher gender identity and the gender configuration of sex education classes (whether mixed or segregated classes), and how these variables might shape the teaching of consent. As I came across few research studies on teacher experiences in teaching consent, this type of qualitative study could be conducted in the years ahead to gain greater insight into the experiences of teachers as the updated curriculum and concepts of consent take hold within the teaching of HPE. In particular, it would be interesting to investigate the ways in which teachers scaffold understanding of consent for students and build on this understanding as students progress through the curriculum. As Ontario is now the first Canadian province to include consent in the teaching of sex education, research in this area could prove fruitful for other provinces looking to include consent in their curricula.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The introduction of consent in the updated HPE curriculum has left questions about how teachers understand the concept and how they will teach it to students. The experiences and reported practices shared by two intermediate HPE teachers in this study are a first step to better illuminate how teachers are using, understanding, and experiencing consent in the classroom. As consent is now a component of the updated HPE curriculum, I hope that teachers will embrace teaching it and educate themselves about the meaning of consent in ways they can share with students in the classroom. As an aspiring HPE teacher, I wish to ensure I am teaching consent to the best of my ability, and to better equip myself for teaching a holistic and
comprehensive sex education, ensuring students are empowered to embrace their sexuality and sexual agency. There are several areas where teachers could be doing better, particularly when it comes to teaching consent differently by gender, but the teachers in this study recognized the importance of consent and sought to teach it well. As consent becomes a staple in the updated curriculum, I hope more teachers will seek out resources and support to ensure they are teaching consent equitably. The updated HPE curriculum has made leaps and bounds in making sex education more inclusive and comprehensive, including the addition of consent as a compulsory topic. I believe that as teachers navigate the updated curriculum and implement topics like consent into their teaching, students will have a more positive, comprehensive and empowering sex education experience.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Signed Consent

Date:

Dear ________________________________ ,

My Name is Alexandra Kelly 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 will focus on the introduction of the concept of consent in the updated Health and Physical Education curriculum. I am interested in interviewing Health and Physical Education teachers who have taught consent this year within the updated curriculum. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one approximately 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 password-protected devices and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor. 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,

Alexandra Kelly

MT Program Contact: Dr. Angela Macdonald-Vemic, Assistant Professor – Teaching Stream
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 Kelly and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name: (printed) ______________________________________

Date: _____________________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol and Questions

Introductory Script: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. The aim of this study is to learn how Health and Physical Education teachers in Ontario understand and teach the concept of consent within the framework of the updated Health and Physical Education curriculum. This interview will last approximately 60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on your strategies and experiences, asking you to reflect on what you have learned teaching consent this past year. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you can withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information

1. How long have you been a Health and Physical Education teacher?
2. What grades do you teach sex education?
3. Was this year the first time you have taught about consent in sex education?
4. Did you receive any pre-service training in sex education?

Teacher Perspectives

1. Talk me through your understanding of consent as it relates to sex education.
   a. Verbal and nonverbal consent
2. Did you know about the meaning of consent prior to its inclusion in the updated curriculum?
3. Do you think a definition of consent in the curriculum would be helpful?
a. Is the legal definition of consent (i.e. age of consent) accessible for students, in your view?

4. Do you believe your understanding of consent aligns with the ways in which it is included in the updated curriculum?

5. What has influenced your understanding of consent?

6. Have you accessed any resources to help you better understand the term?

7. Would you say your teaching about consent differs depending on students’ gender identities?
   a. Why/not?

Teacher Practices

1. Can you walk me through your most recent lesson on consent?
   a. What was the planning process?
   b. How was the class structured?
   c. What amount of time is set aside for the teaching of health and more specifically sex education and consent?
   d. Tell me how you have assessed students’ understanding of consent.
   e. Did any students already have an understanding about what the word means?
      i. If yes, did this understanding conflict with your understanding of consent?
   f. Did you have any students who struggled to understand the meaning of consent?
   g. Do you believe this was a successful lesson? Why/not?
      i. What did you hear/see that made you feel this way?
   h. What if anything would you change next time?
**Supports and Challenges**

1. Since the updated curriculum was released, have you received any additional training or resources to help you implement it?
2. Have you discussed the meaning of consent with other teachers?
3. Do you feel comfortable teaching consent?
4. Give me an example of when you may have encountered resistance to teaching the updated curriculum and sex education.
   a. From students, parents, teachers or administrators; verbal/written, etc.
   b. How did you deal with the situation?
5. What would you say is the biggest challenge you have encountered in teaching consent in the updated curriculum?
6. What advice would you give new teachers about teaching consent specifically and sex education more generally?
7. Do you have any final thoughts?

Thank you for your time and your answers. I appreciate you sharing your experiences with me.