ONTARIO SECONDARY TEACHER COMFORT WITH SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT. This study inquires into teachers' self-identified comfort in teaching about and preventing sexual violence. A Likert-scale survey was used to collect data from 105 secondary teachers from one public school board in Ontario. Findings suggest that participants tend to be more comfortable with teaching about consent and respectful relationships than gender-based and sexual violence, and more comfortable with intervening in more overt and culturally recognizable sexual violence incidents than those that are subtle. Participants overwhelmingly poorly rated the quality of sexual violence education received both pre-service and in-service. Level of comfort, job insecurity, and level of knowledge were all frequently rated as moderate to extreme barriers to teaching about sexual violence. Implications for sexual violence prevention education are discussed.

AISANCE DES ENSEIGNANTS DU SECONDAIRE EN ONTARIO AVEC L'ÉDUCATION À LA PRÉVENTION DE LA VIOLENCE SEXUELLE

RÉSUMÉ. Cette étude examine le degré d'aisance que les enseignants déclarent ressentir lorsqu'ils enseignent et préviennent la violence sexuelle. Un sondage a été employé pour recueillir des données auprès de 105 enseignants du secondaire provenant d'une commission scolaire publique en Ontario. Les résultats suggèrent que les participants se sentent généralement plus à l'aise d'enseigner le consentement et les relations respectueuses que la violence fondée sur le genre et la violence sexuelle, et qu'ils sont plus à l'aise d'intervenir dans des incidents de violence sexuelle manifestes et culturellement reconnaissables que dans ceux qui sont subtils. Le niveau d'aisance, l'insécurité d'emploi et le niveau de connaissances ont tous été fréquemment évalués comme des obstacles modérés à extrêmes à l'enseignement sur la violence sexuelle.

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Those who work in the field of sexual violence in postsecondary and community contexts have long called for K-12 education to join them in taking on the challenge of violence prevention. Research shows that schools are central places for addressing sexual violence and spaces in which it occurs. Sexual violence prevention stakeholders in higher education call on elementary and secondary schools to educate students early and in "subtle and nuanced ways" (Clarke-Vivier & Stearns, 2019, p. 64). Others point out that students often call for teachers to recognize sexual violence and to construct purposeful lessons addressing it (Larkin et al., 2017; Stein, 1995; Vanner & Almanssori, 2021). For its part, the Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum (MOE, 2015, 2019), which is the focus of the present article, addresses primary prevention by outlining mandatory expectations for students to learn about sexual consent. These curriculum documents address consent in a *scaffolded* way, which means that the curricular content builds upon concepts and understandings introduced in previous years such that what students learn about consent in Grade 5 builds upon the lessons of Grade 4 in age-appropriate ways. Consent is also a thematic thread woven across the documents, approached variously via concepts such as bodily autonomy, human reproduction, and healthy relationships. Nevertheless, teachers encounter significant barriers in implementing such lessons. Indeed, beyond Health and Physical Education, Vanner (2021) has found that although many opportunities exist in the Ontario curriculum to teach about gender-based violence, critical engagement with complex concepts is often limited to upper-year secondary school courses that are optional rather than required.

Conducted in 2021, the purpose of the present investigation was to gain insight into teachers' perceptions of their comfort levels in teaching about sexual violence prevention education. The research was guided by the following question: How comfortable are teachers with teaching about and addressing sexual violence prevention in schools? Situated within a feminist lens, this research understands sexual violence as 1) gendered (Conroy & Cotter, 2017) and based in power and control (Brownmiller, 1975; Johnson & Colpitts, 2013); 2) an insidious phenomenon that is often reproduced by systemic, social, and discursive structures (Almanssori & Stanley, 2021) as well as supported through individual behaviours (Gavey, 2005, 2019); and 3) an occurrence that happens along a continuum that encompasses various, interrelated forms (Kelly, 1987; Stout, 1991). Sexual violence prevention is approached here through the

nomological framework put forward by McMahon and Banyard (2012). Based on their study of peer groups on campus, they considered bystander opportunities to prevent sexual violence. Prevention is split up into three categories: primary prevention, or before occurrences of sexual violence; secondary intervention, or during an occurrence; and tertiary intervention, or after an occurrence. The authors classify education, such as teaching about consent and gender norms, as a proactive prevention opportunity (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). The strength of the framework comes from conceptualizing sexual violence as a continuum (Kelly, 1987; Stout, 1991), whereby all occurrences of sexual violence are connected, causing harm and perpetuating cultures in which sexual violence becomes frequent and normalized.

The concept of the continuum is best understood in relation to cultural recognition, or the degree to which sexually violent behaviours are considered appropriate or inappropriate within a particular culture and its institutions; frequency is also a salient factor, or how often specific incidences of sexual violence occur in such a cultural context (McMahon et al., 2011; Stout, 1991). The high end of the continuum includes behaviours that are high in cultural recognition and low in frequency, such as rape, while the middle of the continuum encompasses behaviours that are sometimes recognizable and somewhat frequent, such as date or marital rape (McMahon et al., 2011; Stout, 1991). The low end of the continuum includes behaviours that are low in cultural recognition but high in frequency, such as inappropriate touching, victim blaming, or rape jokes; these incidences tend to be a normalized part of everyday life and least likely to provoke proactive bystander intervention (McMahon et al., 2011; Stout, 1991).

The research that is the focus of the present article took place in Ontario, a province that has seen heated debates in sex education, and particularly during election times. Such debate has held substantial implications for curricular policy decisions and public debates. New elementary and secondary Health and Physical Education curricula were implemented in Ontario first in 2015 and then again in 2019, after many iterations of parent consultations and changes in provincial leadership. The 2019 curriculum showed little change from the 2015 version (Jones, 2019). Although consent was a consistent, scaffolded thread throughout the 2015 curriculum, only 58% of students aged 13–17 reported having learned about sexual violence (Larkin et al., 2017). Meanwhile, 61% reported learning about communicating about sex. Findings from the survey also showed that nearly 1 in 4 students wanted to learn more about these topics (Larkin et al., 2017). More research is needed to paint a picture of how

(and whether) the new curriculum (of 2019) has changed the state of sex education and sexual violence prevention in Ontario schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community models of sexual violence prevention point out that all students are impacted when schools fall short in addressing sexual violence (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). However, researchers have consistently found, and Canadian statistics corroborate, that women, girls, and non-binary individuals, especially those who are Black, Indigenous, and racialized, are often the most vulnerable to victimization (Conroy & Cotter, 2017). Harm along the continuum of sexual violence is often multiplied for individuals at the intersections of race, class, ability, and other social locations; for example, Black girls who are poor are at increased risk of experiencing sexual violence and less likely to report or seek help due to fear of victim blaming (Litchmore, 2021).

One of the key barriers to sexual violence prevention in schools is the inadequacy of sex education training that teachers receive. Over forty years ago, Herold and Benson (1979) surveyed Ontario teachers and found that most reported inadequate teacher training in sex education as one of the key barriers in its effective implementation. A 1999 study of Bachelor of Education (BEd) programs across Canada revealed that only 15.5% of teacher education programs provided compulsory training in sex education while 26.2% offered optional sex education courses, however only a third of teacher candidates took such courses (McKay & Barrett, 1999). More recent research attests to the continued absence of teacher training in sex education (Almanssori, 2022; Cohen et al., 2012; Ninomiya, 2010). A recent metanalysis found that teacher training and professional development was a significant factor in adequately addressing sex education in schools (Walker et al., 2020). Also found to be important was institutional support from educational leaders such as principals and school staff, in addition to education stakeholders' promoting the importance of sex education in the broader community (Walker et al., 2020).

The absence of teacher training in sex education exacerbates discomfort in teaching to challenging topics such as sexual violence. According to Barr et al. (2014), the inadequacy of teacher training leads teachers to avoid addressing curriculum topics that are controversial, even if they feel that these subjects are important to cover. Moreover, the scholarly literature on teacher sex education training tends to focus narrowly on biological processes such as puberty and how to prevent teenage pregnancies, sexually

transmitted diseases, and other negative consequences of sex (e.g., Barr et al., 2014; Clayton et al., 2018). At the time of the present study, there was little actual research that addresses the role that teachers play in sexual violence prevention (Levin & Hammock, 2020).

Students wish to learn about consent and sexual violence. Meaney et al. (2009) found that students highly rated the importance of learning about sexual coercion and sexual assault, personal safety, sexual decision-making in dating, and communicating about sex. While 72% of students indicated that they should begin to learn about sexual violence in elementary school, 63% reported having begun to learn about it in secondary school (Meaney et al., 2009). Similarly, in a 2011 report by the American Association of University Women, among the ideas students offered for reducing experiences of sexual harassment was having designated staff speak to and hold in-class discussions (Hill & Kearl, 2011). In a recent Canadian study focused on South Asian secondary students, Meherali and colleagues (2021) found that sexual violence is among the topics students reported as missing from sex education. For example, one student in their study said that he felt teachers in his school were not trained to talk about sexual health (Meherali et al., 2021). Students wanted to learn about sexual health and sexual violence in schools; however, opportunities were scarce.

In addition to a lack of preparedness on the part of teachers, the literature points to a lack or inappropriateness of sexual violence intervention. American girls interviewed by Berman et al. (2000) reported little to no consequences for sexual harassment in school, even when it was reported to teachers. Some expressed that when girls fought back, teachers would reprimand them instead of the boys. There was an "overwhelming perception that schools do little to discourage or even discuss this behavior" (Berman et al., 2000, p. 42). Similarly, Rahimi and Liston's (2009) findings led them to conclude that many teachers saw cases of verbal harassment as compliments by boys who did not mean harm. Studies like these highlight that teachers fail to intervene in cases of sexual violence and may even contribute to further harm. Teachers often hold the view that girls are 'gatekeepers' of sexual experience (Chambers et al., 2004; Rahimi & Liston, 2009), a belief that provides fuel for victim blaming discourses (Almanssori & Stanley, 2021). For example, Rahimi and Liston contend that "teachers may let harassment of so-called bad girls be perpetuated in their classrooms to attempt a kind of moral policing of the sexuality of young women" (p. 529). Victim blaming discourses shift accountability away from perpetrators as well as erase community accountability (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). Ollis (2014) similarly found that teacher understandings of gender-based violence are often

"positioned in discourses of individual pathology and causal factors such as poor communication skills or misuse of alcohol" (p. 711). Such understandings are at odds with those of feminist research, which contends that sexual violence is a cultural problem that occurs within systemic contexts of oppression.

While some teachers seek to address issues of sexual violence through their teaching, they can also face pushback from students, parents, and administrators, as well as school and school board policies (Dadvand & Cahill, 2021; Eisenberg et al., 2013). According to Eisenberg et al. (2013), such "barriers may affect how much classroom time they spend on a given topic or other aspects of how they teach the topic, versus whether they teach specific topics" (p. 340). This team of researchers found that while the majority of health teachers reported that sexual violence should be taught, a much smaller percentage reported actually teaching it. Eisenberg et al. (2013) ultimately point to the need for "additional teacher training specific to sexual violence, mandated reporting, and managing disclosure of personal information," concluding that it "may make teachers more comfortable with the possibility of their students reporting sexual violence" (p. 341). In line with tertiary level prevention (McMahon & Banyard, 2012), scholarship supports the need for disclosure training and robust responses to disclosures as key aspects of transformative sexual violence prevention efforts (Fehler-Cabral & Campbell, 2013).

Although the research discussed thus far demonstrates that teachers feel discomfort and unprepared to address sexual violence in the classroom, male teachers in particular have been shown to be resistant to discourses around violence prevention. Ollis (2014) found that male teachers tended to be uncomfortable with the terms 'gender-based violence' and 'violence against women,' but comfortable with the less charged term 'respectful relationships'. The first two terms, while more politically charged, actually address the gendered context in which violence occurs whereas this context is totally occluded in 'respectful relationships'. Further, and consistent with these results, while most men and boys do not condone sexual violence, many excuse or justify it in various circumstances (Feltey et al., 1991, p. 246; Flood, 2010). This research is particularly alarming given that the majority of specialist health education teachers in Ontario, who are tasked with teaching sex education in grades nine to twelve, are men (Hoffman, 2017). Though writing more than three decades ago, the statement (on the part of Feltey et al., 1991) that education geared toward men and boys about the sexual oppression of women is necessary for effective prevention education is just as, or more, true today in 2023 as it was in 1991.

In short, the literature on the roles teachers can play in sexual violence prevention, even though scant, paints a picture of scarcity: scarcity of sex education training, flawed teacher understandings of sexual violence, and institutional barriers to and personal discomfort with teaching about and addressing this important topic. Perhaps most alarming is research which suggests that teachers can reproduce victim blaming discourses. Thus, the need for the study that is the focus of the present article.

METHODS

Following Research Ethics Board approval from the author's home university, participants were recruited through an email that was sent from one Ontario teacher union to all of its members, who were all occasional and permanent secondary school teachers. The elementary teacher union refused to participate in the research. Recruitment took place in 2021 and ceased after a period of time had passed and no more incoming surveys were obtained.

The survey was created by the author and contained 24 five-point Likert scale questions that assessed the following four broad themes: 1) teacher comfort levels with teaching about various topics related to gender-based and sexual violence; 2) teacher attitudes toward sexual violence; 3) teacher understandings of sexual violence; and 4) teacher perceptions of barriers and facilitators of teaching about and addressing its prevention. The survey was researcher-developed as no similar survey was found in the existing literature. As Gay et al. (2011) explain, "at times, constructing your own instrument will be necessary, especially if your research topic and concepts are original or relatively unresearched" (p. 153).

Participants first responded to demographic questions (viz., gender, highest level of education, employment status, years of teaching practice, and teaching grade level). As stated, the survey, designed using the nomological framework of sexual violence prevention (McMahon & Banyard, 2012) as well as the continuum of sexual violence (Kelly, 1987; Stout, 1991), consisted of six categories of inquiry, with three to six questions per category. The precise categories were: level of agreement with what should be taught in school; level of comfort teaching specific topics; level of comfort intervening when witnessing sexual violence incidences throughout the continuum; level of agreement with sexual violence as gendered; quality of sexual violence prevention education received; and degree of perceived barriers to teaching about consent and sexual violence. Frequency tables were produced, and then percentages were calculated and interpreted in light of existing literature. Frequencies

and percentages are a form of descriptive data analysis. A frequency table shows the distribution of observations based on the options in a variable. Frequency tables are helpful to understand which options occur more or less often in the dataset. Because Likert scale data is ordinal, it is argued that both descriptive and inferential statistics tell limited stories about the data (Sullivan & Artino, 2013). To address this limitation, scores of 4 and 5 (for example, agree and strongly agree, respectively) were not treated as inherently different; the same was true for scores of 1 and 2 (for example, strongly disagree and agree, respectively). They each indicated agreement with the statement presented. This is because with ordinal data, Likert response intervals are not intrinsically equal between successive points on the scale. Findings were further contextualized through feminist understandings of sexual violence prevention.

FINDINGS

One hundred and five (n = 105) secondary teachers from a local school board in Ontario voluntarily participated by filling out the anonymous survey. Table 1 represents the demographic make-up of the sample of secondary school teachers.

TABLE 1. Participant Demographic Information.

	Total (N=105)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Man	28	27
Woman	77	73
Highest Level of Education		
Bachelor of Education (BEd)	91	87
Master's Degree	14	13
Employment Status		
Full-Time	88	84
Part-Time	17	16
Years of Teaching Practice		
1-10	59	56
11-20	27	26
21-30	14	13
31+	5	5

Teaching Grade Level		
Special Education (9-12)	9	9
9, 10	59	56
11, 12	28	27
9-12	9	9

The majority of those who completed the survey were women (73%); men were in the minority (27%). This split, though, is representative of the teaching profession in Ontario, where 75% of all registered teachers in 2020 were women (Ontario College of Teachers, 2020). Most participants had a BEd degree as their highest level of education and most were employed full time. The majority of participants (56%) had 1-10 years of teaching experience. Just over half of participants taught grades nine and ten during the time they filled out the survey, while 27% taught grades eleven and twelve. Given that secondary school sex education is taught primarily in the mandatory Grade 9 health and physical education course (Almanssori, 2022), this demographic information makes it likely that participants were among those who were tasked with providing education on sex and consent.

Level of Agreement about Sex Education Topics that Should Be Taught in School

While most participants either somewhat agreed (42%) or strongly agreed (46%) that respectful relationships should be taught about in school, they were marginally less likely to agree (somewhat agree: 29%; strongly agree, 39%) that teachers should be responsible for teaching about gender-based violence in school. Still, they were even less likely to somewhat agree (29%) and strongly agree (19%) that teachers should be responsible for teaching about sexual violence in school. In fact, 47% of participants either somewhat or strongly disagreed that teachers should be responsible for teaching about sexual violence in school, as compared to 29% for gender-based violence, and 10% for respectful relationships.

Level of Comfort in Teaching Specific Topics

The majority of participants reported being extremely comfortable (91%) teaching about respectful relationships in school, with only 9% reporting that they were somewhat comfortable with doing so. Most participants also reported being either somewhat comfortable (58%) or extremely comfortable (29%) with teaching about sexual consent in school. The responses were more varied for gender-based violence, with 35% of

participants responding they were somewhat comfortable and only 10% responding they were extremely comfortable with teaching the topic. 32% were somewhat uncomfortable, 16% were extremely uncomfortable, and 7% indicated they were neither uncomfortable or comfortable with teaching about gender-based violence. A minority of participants were somewhat (28%) or extremely comfortable (2%) with teaching about sexual violence in schools; 44% were somewhat uncomfortable, 19% were extremely uncomfortable, and 8% were neither uncomfortable nor comfortable.

Level of Comfort in Intervening when Witnessing Sexual Violence

For this category of inquiry, questions were designed along the sexual violence continuum (Kelly, 1987; Stout, 1991; McMahon & Banyard, 2012). The questions assessed the degree of comfort participants felt with intervening at the low, middle, or high ends of the continuum (See Appendix 1), and whether in the hallways or in the classroom. Participants were provided with a definition of the continuum before they began filling out the six questions in this category. Table 2 represents the frequency of responses by question and level of comfort response.

TABLE 2. Perceived Level of Comfort Intervening when Witnessing Sexual Violence (N=105).

	Extremely un-comfortable	Somewhat un-comfortable	Neither un-comfortable nor comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Extremely comfortable
How comfortable are you with intervening when witnessing sexual violence at the ***low*** **end of the continuum in the *classroom*?**	3	5	17	44	36
How comfortable are you with intervening when witnessing sexual violence at the ***low*** **end of the continuum in the *hallways*?**	12	26	8	38	21
How comfortable are you with intervening when witnessing sexual	3	6	15	41	40

violence at the ***middle*** **of the continuum in the** ***classroom***?					
How comfortable are you with intervening when witnessing sexual violence at the ***middle*** **of the continuum in the** ***hallways***?	8	5	9	45	38
How comfortable are you with intervening when witnessing sexual violence at the ***high*** **end of the continuum in the** ***classroom***?	-	-	14	24	67
How comfortable are you with intervening when witnessing sexual violence at the ***high*** **end of the continuum in the hallways**?	-	-	14	40	51

Participants were more likely to report being somewhat or extremely comfortable with intervening when witnessing sexual violence at the low end of the continuum, with greater comfort doing so in the classroom versus in the hallways. They were also more likely to report being somewhat or extremely comfortable with intervening when witnessing sexual violence in the middle of the continuum, with similar rates of responses in the classroom versus in the hallways. At the high end of the continuum, participant responses shifted markedly, with no one reporting being somewhat nor extremely uncomfortable with intervening, whether in the classroom or in the hallways; most participants reported being somewhat or extremely comfortable with intervening when witnessing sexual violence at the high end of the continuum and in both contexts (see: Table 2).

Frequency of Interventions when Witnessing Sexual Violence

Just as the last category, this category was also designed along with the continuum of sexual violence (Kelly, 1987; Stout, 1991; McMahon &

Banyard, 2012; see Appendix 1). Questions assessed the frequency of interventions participants reported experiencing at the low, middle, or high end of the continuum. When asked how frequently they have intervened when witnessing sexual violence at the low end of the continuum, 3% of participants said never, 41% said rarely, 34% said sometimes, 10% often, and 12% said very often. When asked how frequently they have intervened when witnessing sexual violence at the middle of the continuum, 2% of participants said never, 17% said rarely, 49% said sometimes, 30% often, and 3% said very often. When asked how frequently they have intervened when witnessing sexual violence at the high end of the continuum, 2% of participants said never, 7% said rarely, 56% said sometimes, 31% often, and 4% said very often.

Level of Agreement with Sexual Violence as Gendered

Participants were asked four questions along this category of inquiry, as displayed in Table 3 accompanied by results along the scale.

TABLE 3. Level of Agreement with Sexual Violence as Gendered (N=105).

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Do you agree that sexual violence is a gendered phenomenon?	2	47	6	40	10
Do you agree that girls and women are more likely to experience sexual violence than boys and men?	3	40	7	44	11
Do you agree that non-binary individuals are more likely to experience sexual violence than binary individuals?	16	40	20	24	5
Do you agree that masculinity impacts sexual violence perpetration?	20	48	6	21	10

A large percentage of participants responded that they somewhat disagreed that sexual violence was a gendered phenomenon (45%), that girls and women are more likely to experience it than boys and men (38%), that

non-binary individuals are more likely to experience it than binary individuals (38%), and that masculinity impacts sexual violence perpetration (46%). Also, a large percentage of participants rated somewhat agree when asked if sexual violence was a gendered phenomenon (38%), if girls and women are more likely to experience sexual violence than boys and men (42%), if non-binary individuals are more likely to experience such violence than binary individuals (23%), and if masculinity impacts the perpetration of sexual violence (20%). A considerable percentage of teachers strongly disagreed that non-binary individuals are more likely to experience sexual violence (15%) and that masculinity impacts sexual violence perpetration (19%).

Quality of Sexual Violence Prevention Education Received

Participants were asked to rate the quality of sexual violence education prevention they received prior to becoming a teacher and while on the job as either: poor, fair, good, very good, or excellent. Strikingly, all of the participants rated their sexual violence prevention education received prior to becoming a teacher as poor (93%) or fair (7%), while none scored it as good, very good, or excellent. Similarly, 89% rated the quality of sexual violence prevention training they received in service as poor, while the remaining 11% of responses were fair.

Barriers to Teaching about Consent and Sexual Violence

In this category of inquiry, participants were asked to rate three items – their level of comfort, their insecurity in their role, and their level of knowledge – as: not a barrier, a small barrier, a moderate barrier, a severe barrier, or an extreme barrier to successfully teaching about consent and sexual violence in their roles as teachers (see Table 4). The most often rated as severe (37%) or extreme barrier (23%) was their own level of knowledge, followed by their insecurity in their role (29% rated it a severe barrier and 23% rated it an extreme barrier), and then their level of comfort (19% rated it a severe barrier and 4% rated it an extreme barrier).

TABLE 4. Barriers to Teaching about Consent and Sexual Violence (N=105).

	Not a barrier	Minor barrier	Moderate barrier	Severe barrier	Extreme barrier
Rate the degree to which **your level of comfort** is a barrier to successfully teaching about consent and sexual violence in your role as a teacher.	22	29	30	20	4

Rate the degree to which your **insecurity in your role** is a barrier to successfully teaching about consent and sexual violence in your role as a teacher.	4	18	29	30	24
Rate the degree to which your **level of knowledge** and understanding is a barrier successfully teaching about consent and sexual violence in your role as a teacher.	4	14	24	39	24

Notably, all three categories were rated at least as a moderate barrier by most participants. Very few participants responded that their insecurity in their role (4%) or their level of knowledge (4%) was not a barrier at all, meaning that most perceived them as at least minor barriers.

DISCUSSION

The findings were analyzed using the feminist theoretical tools of the continuum of sexual violence (Kelly, 1987; Stout, 1991) and a nomological framework of sexual violence prevention (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). Overall, the findings point to barriers to teacher engagement with sexual violence prevention at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of prevention. Although Rahimi and Liston (2009) found that most teachers agreed that sexual violence should be taught in school, the present study's findings point to a different pattern. Participants were more likely to agree that respectful relationships should be taught in school, rather than gender-based violence and sexual violence, pointing to a need to educate teachers on the importance of their roles in prevention and social change. As noted previously, this need was also pointed out by Walker et al. (2020) in their systemic review of the literature.

Along the same lines, findings indicate that participants were more comfortable with teaching about respectful relationships and sexual consent than they were with teaching about gender-based violence and sexual violence. These results contradict findings from two Canadian studies, which indicated that most teachers felt somewhat comfortable with teaching about coercion and sexual assault (Cohen et al., 2004; Ninomiya, 2010). Another study that supports findings presented in this article found that teachers are "uncomfortable in discussing sexual topics openly with young people" (Wight & Buston, 2003, p. 529) and that they struggle to contend with "the appropriateness of the content and underlying values of their sex education" (p. 529). Responses of low

comfort in teaching about gender-based and sexual violence may also reflect cultural shifts in understanding and responding to sexual violence as a result of social movements such as #MeToo (Almanssori & Stanley, 2021).

The finding that most participants felt increased discomfort with intervening at the low end and middle of the continuum than they did in the high end of the continuum reflects research which shows that people in the general population tend to feel discomfort with intervening when witnessing behaviours that are not widely recognized as constituting sexual violence (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). Participants not only felt increased comfort, they also reported greater frequency of intervention at the middle and high ends of the continuum, a finding that can be explained by research which shows that teachers do not recognize behaviours at the low end of the continuum as inappropriate or as violating (Rahimi & Liston, 2009). Teachers were more likely to report comfort in addressing sexual violence in their classrooms than they did in the hallways, which may point to the bystander effect (McMahon & Banyard, 2012), for example they may feel that incidents outside of their own classrooms lie beyond their scope of control or responsibility (e.g., that another staff member will handle it).

Previous research has demonstrated that gender transformative approaches to sex education (Ubillos-Landa et al., 2021) and sexual violence prevention (Bhana, 2013; Pérez-Martínez et al., 2021) are most impactful in creating self-perpetuating social change. The first step of such an approach is stakeholder understanding that sexual violence is a gendered phenomenon, experienced more often by girls, women, and non-binary individuals (Conroy & Cotter, 2017), perpetrated and supported most frequently by men and boys (Feltey, 1991; McCloskey & Rafael, 2005; Davies et al., 2012), and sustained through the norms and power relations of hegemonic masculinity (Klein, 2006). Given these points, it is concerning that the present study's results indicate that a considerable percentage of participants responded they somewhat or strongly disagree that sexual violence is a gendered phenomenon. They were especially likely to disagree that non-binary individuals experience sexual violence at higher rates and that masculinity impacts sexual violence perpetration. Again, these findings point to the need for robust in-service education on the gendered context of sexual violence.

Such training can increase teachers' willingness and confidence in teaching about various sex education topics, especially those that are deemed contentious (Cohen et al., 2012). However, it is precisely the kind

of training that tends to be absent or lacking (Almanssori, 2022), thus supporting findings from elsewhere and from this study as well that participants overwhelmingly rated the quality of sexual violence prevention education they received, both pre-service and in-service, as poor. In line with this, middle school teachers in Charmaraman and colleagues' (2013) study reported receiving more in-service education on bullying than they did on sexual harassment, and tended to understand sexual harassment as something that occurs between adults rather than amongst peers in school; this is in spite of decades of research which shows that peer-to-peer sexual violence, especially that at the low end of the continuum, occurs frequently in the context of school (Conroy, 2013; Espelage & Holt, 2006). Teacher education's focus on bullying rather than sexual harassment, both in initial teacher training and in professional development, may also explain results from various points in the survey that point to teacher discomfort and flawed understandings of sexual violence, such as not viewing it as a gendered phenomenon.

Of interest to this research was to examine the degree to which teachers perceived the three factors as barriers to teaching about consent and sexual violence, namely, level of comfort, job insecurity, and level of knowledge. The findings that most participants rated each of the factors as moderate to extreme barriers reflect previous research (Lokanc-Diluzio et al., 2007; Eisenberg et al., 2013). To combat such barriers, teachers in Dadvand and Cahill's (2021) Australian study provided the following suggestions: "committed leadership, collaborative organisational culture, ongoing in-house professional learning, compassionate collegial relationships and proactive programme provision" (p. 299).

Among the limitations of the present investigation is the small sample size as well as that recruitment was limited to one school board. Another limitation is the use of a researcher-created survey, instead of an established measure with high validity and reliability, though such a measure currently does not exist. Any measure, nonetheless, should be informed by feminist understandings of sexual violence, incorporating knowledge about the continuum of violence, rape culture, institutional responsibility, and so on. Future researchers should build on the findings of this study by investigating larger sample sizes, designing a more robust measure (based on feminist theories), as well as conducting in-depth, qualitative research on teacher (dis)comfort with sexual violence prevention education. Researchers should also inquire into the perspectives of teachers from different school boards, including the French and Catholic school boards, which may express more conservative views on topics associated with sexual health and gender equality. One of

the implications of this research is the need for pre-service and in-service training related specifically to sexual violence prevention education. Teacher discomfort in teaching about and intervening to prevent sexual violence is a great impediment to eliminating sexual violence in schools and societies. Although feminist understandings of sexual violence tie the phenomenon to broader issues of consent and respectful relationships, teaching these topics is itself a form of proactive sexual violence prevention (McMahon & Banyard, 2012), and there is a need to arm teachers with the tools to be comfortable, whether addressing at the primary, secondary, or tertiary level; in other words, before (preventing violence), during (noticing and intervening), and after (supporting survivors) an incident of sexual violence.

CONCLUSION

This study points to the need for pre-service teacher education and professional development for teachers to increase their knowledge, comfort, and confidence in being key stakeholders in sexual violence prevention. The findings suggest that teachers may feel greater comfort in intervening when witnessing sexual violence at the middle or high end of the continuum than at the low end of the continuum, reflecting previous research from the general population that shows that people tend not to intervene when witnessing subtle, less recognizable incidences of sexual violence. Also echoing previous scholarship is the finding that participants overwhelmingly rated their pre-service and in-service educational experiences in sexual violence prevention as poor and frequently rated level of knowledge, comfort, and insecurity in their roles as at least moderate barriers to teaching about sexual violence. Moreover, teachers felt more comfortable with teaching about respectful relationships and consent than they did about gender-based and sexual violence, pointing to the lack of educational opportunities related to the latter two topics, as well as the necessity of engaging teachers in understanding the importance of practical strategies for sexual violence prevention in schools.

Given the findings, I recommend that teacher education curricula make explicit the connections between education on respectful relationships and consent and education on gender-based and sexual violence. Prevention education should recognize that healthy sexuality and relationships are not separate concepts from victimization. As Perry (2008) explains, "the fields of sexual health promotion and primary sexual violence prevention are clearly complementary", adding that both critique harmful gender and sexual norms so as to provide a basis for expansive notions of sexuality. Moreover, teacher training should use the concept of

the sexual violence continuum (Kelly, 1987) to give teachers access to a language that defines harmful acts more broadly, rather than focusing only on sexual assault or rape; such training would also have the effect of inviting teachers to think about the connections between subtler forms of harm and overt harm. Action-oriented learning, such as discussing case studies (e.g., does this situation constitute sexual violence?) or role-playing challenging scenarios (e.g., what would you do if a student said a rape joke in class?), would also help teachers develop the skills and confidence to intervene when witnessing incidents of sexual violence.

Although this study sought to assess teacher comfort, the term *comfort* is of course contested and encompasses various complexities involved in engaging teachers in sexual violence prevention. To assess comfort is arguably a first step, best followed by action-oriented research that involves educational opportunities for teachers, followed by ongoing work to arm stakeholders at various institutional levels of schooling with research-driven prevention tools (e.g., teachers, supporting staff, administrators, teacher consultants, superintendents). Increasing teacher comfort in sexual violence prevention must be complemented by curricular transformation, particularly given that emerging research has pointed out the shortage of critical, feminist discourses in even the newest Ontario curricula (Vanner, 2021), this in addition to the lack of institutional support for teachers or broader education campaigns for parents and families.

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APPENDIX 1

In this survey, sexual violence is understood as a continuum which encompasses commonly accepted behaviours (in a given culture) such as sexist and rape jokes (low end), somewhat commonly accepted behaviours such as sexual harassment, coercion and date rape (middle end), and less accepted behaviours such as stranger rape (high end).

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