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# The Social Construction of Sexuality in Primary School Classrooms

Anna Spengen

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The Social Construction of Sexuality in Primary School Classrooms

by

Anna Spengen

A major research paper submitted to the department of Sociology

Wilfrid Laurier University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Through qualitative interviews with primary school teachers, this research sought to uncover how heterosexual privilege is maintained in talk about sexuality. More specifically, this research sought to identify the strategies used by teachers in talking to their students about sexuality. These strategies took shape in the following: a reliance on scientific explanations, deferring to others, a reliance on faith and religion, and the presumption that children are innocent and asexual. This research determined that these strategies were used to produce, reproduce, and maintain heterosexism and heteronormativity. The implications of this research are that schools are missing an important opportunity to create a safe and inclusive environment for gay and lesbian students as well as ‘non-normative’ heterosexual students.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is constantly being constructed and reconstructed through socio-cultural processes and practices. These processes and practices create meaning surrounding the sexual body, sexual behaviours, and sexual identities (Seidman, 2003). Every institution in our society plays an important role in shaping our understandings of sexuality, such as religious institutions, workplace environments, or school settings. These sexual meanings are produced and reproduced through the activities, resources, interactions, and types of talk used within each institution. Through these processes and practices, social actors tend to privilege or normalize heterosexuality, while simultaneously rendering other forms of sexuality deviant or invisible (Kehily, 2002). This contributes to heterosexism and heteronormativity.

Schools have influence over the development of sexuality. They are often the first site or source from which students learn about sexuality. Schools are seen as an important site of sex regulation, and sexuality is infused through all areas of the school: the mandated curriculum, the playground, and student-teacher relationships.

Teachers, particularly at the primary level, have influence over how children come to interpret or understand sexual meanings from a young age (Kehily, 2002). Although mandated to follow a curriculum on sexuality, teachers are continuously tasked with answering questions posed by students, as well as addressing incidents of a sexual nature in the school environment. While teachers must adhere to certain guidelines and expectations, they have a degree of autonomy within their classrooms. This freedom allows teachers to create their own lesson plans, structure their own activities, and address student questions and concerns. Through the activities

they choose, the resources they provide, and the language they use, teachers commonly equate heterosexuality with appropriate and normative sexuality.

Research indicates that teachers experience many challenges in teaching about sexuality in their classrooms. At the primary grade levels, teachers are largely concerned about repercussions from students' parents if they say something "inappropriate" (see Epstein, O'Flynn, & Telford, 2003; DePalma & Jennett, 2010; Puchner & Klein, 2012). Teachers are also concerned about providing their students with too much information at such a young age (see Robinson, 2002; Wallis & VanEvery, 2000). Teachers' own comfort levels and level of knowledge in talking about sexuality frequently influence which topics are discussed and which topics are made invisible (see Cohen, Sears, Byers, & Weaver, 2004; Epstein et al., 2003; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2011). As a result of these teaching challenges, teachers tend to utilize certain strategies<sup>1</sup> in their discussions of sexuality. Through these strategies, a heterosexual version of sexuality is primarily promoted.

My research on sexuality sought to investigate how primary school teachers discuss sexuality with their students, and what strategies they employ when doing so. My research discusses the implications of such strategies, in order to recognize how they promote or privilege a particular type of sexuality. Thus, this research addresses the following question: how do primary school teachers construct and privilege heterosexuality in their classrooms?

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<sup>1</sup> I debated whether to call these "strategies" or "practices". For the purposes of this MRP, I chose the former as the term "strategy" implies motivation and intent. I believe that when teachers are addressing sexuality, they deliberately avoid talking about particular types of sexuality.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexuality in the social sciences has been theorized from two different perspectives: essentialism and social constructionism. Although essentialist perspectives have previously dominated, there has been a movement towards social constructionist perspectives to theorize and understand sexuality. My research is situated within the social constructionist perspective because it looks at social processes and practices (i.e teachers' talk) as contributing to heterosexism and heteronormativity.

### **Essentialist Approaches to Sexuality**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, essentialism was the dominant perspective used to study sexuality. This perspective states that sexuality is an objective, static, and inherent aspect of individual beings (Kitzinger, 1995). The essentialist perspective most commonly takes form in evolutionary theories, biological determinism, and even cultural theories of essentialism. Within sexuality research, essentialists seek to make distinct categorizations through evidencing differences between people and between sexualities. Most commonly, this means identifying distinct differences between males and females, and heterosexuals and homosexuals. Cultural essentialists argue that inherent differences are the result of universal experiences had in infancy and childhood. Other essentialists often rely on evolutionary, genetic, neurobiological, and hormonal data to make claims to these categorizations as natural (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Overall, this perspective posits that “sexual phenomena resides within the individual” (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998, p. 13). Through emphasizing the inherent aspects of sexuality, essentialists also make claims about which sexual behaviours and identities are considered normal and legitimate.

In conducting research on sexuality, essentialists use scientific methods to claim that ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ about sexuality exist. In their infamous book on sexuality, Masters and Johnson (as cited in Seidman, 2003) focused almost exclusively on the physical and physiological aspects of sexuality. They outlined the physiology of stimulation and orgasm, as well as biologically based sexual dysfunctions. In effect, this research positioned sexuality as internal to the individual (Seidman, 2003). In studying sexual orientation, essentialists often look to concordance rates amongst twin pairs. Such genetic-based investigations seek to show that if sexuality (especially sexual orientation) is a biological determination, then sexuality is not freely chosen by individuals. As a result of this biological determinism, essentialists argue that sexuality is undeserving of moral judgements (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). The overall purpose of essentialist investigations into human sexuality, desire, fantasy, and behaviour is to reveal the natural laws behind them (Seidman, 2003). In doing so, essentialists make claims to the validity and legitimacy of social categorizations (Kitzinger, 1995).

The essentialist perspective on sexuality translates into particular ways of understanding sexual discrimination. The essentialist view on sexual discrimination is that belief in the superiority of heterosexuality is individualistic and internal. Essentialists view the privileging and normalizing of heterosexuality as based in individual homophobia. In order to challenge homophobia, essentialists seek to dispel individual perceptions of heterosexual privilege (Tomsen, 2006). For example, if a teacher’s talk constructed homosexuality as deviant, essentialists would claim that particular teacher to be homophobic. By blaming individuals for the existence and permeation of homophobia in society, the social processes and practices that may sustain homophobia are not taken into account (Tomsen, 2006).

A major critique of essentialism is that it blames individual people for the oppression that exists in society. For example, to reduce sexual discrimination, essentialists seek to change the individual rather than change marginalizing and oppressive social systems (Bohan, 1993). The problem with locating homophobia within the individual is that in doing so, heterosexual privilege is never challenged. Rather, heterosexual privilege is simply accepted as the ‘norm’ while attempting to address the problems created by heterosexuals for lesbian and gay individuals (Kitzinger, 1996). Largely due to this critique, social constructionist approaches to sexuality began to develop.

### **Social Constructionist Approaches to Sexuality**

The social constructionist perspective on sexuality began to rise during the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Thinkers such as McIntosh (1968), Gagnon and Simon (1973), and Foucault (1978) broke ground in the field by theorizing sexuality as an aspect of one’s social life, social behaviour, and social role (Kitzinger, 1995). Within sexuality research, social constructionists look at how sexuality is continuously constructed and reconstructed through socio-cultural processes and practices. These processes and practices are said to shape our understandings of the sexual body, sexual behaviours, and sexual identities (Seidman, 2003). Overall, this perspective posits sexual phenomena “as external to the individual, defined by social understandings and discourse” (Delamater & Hyde, 1998, p. 13). Therefore, by researching the processes and practices used to construct sexuality, social constructionists can identify how they normalize and privilege certain sexual behaviours and identities.

In conducting research on sexuality, social constructionists note that differences in sexuality are “cultural, historical, and political, not natural or fixed” (Katz, 1995, p. 194). Here, social constructionists reject so-called “natural” divisions and categorizations. Rather, they attest

to a level of fluidity within sexuality. Such researchers may investigate how social environments can lead to an adherence to a particular type of sexuality over another (Kitzinger, 1995). More specifically, Katz (1995) finds social constructionists look to the existence of reproductive, gender, and pleasure politics that privilege heterosexuality. Katz (1995) challenges the taken-for-granted assumption of heterosexuality, suggesting that heterosexuality is a social role which can be chosen. This is in opposition to essentialists, who tend to view sexualities as an inherent 'condition'. Social constructionists also point to the changes in sexual meanings over time and between cultures to highlight that sexuality is not static or inherent. Social constructionists note that "we are born with bodies, but it is society that determines which parts of the body and which pleasure and acts are sexual" (Seidman, 2003, p. 38). By investigating sexuality, desire, fantasy, and behaviour, social constructionists seek to uncover how social processes and practices perpetuate heterosexuality as normal.

Some social constructionists also investigate how sexuality is mediated through constructions of the body. For instance, Braun and Kitzinger (2001), found that "women's experiences of the vagina, and their talk about those experiences, are constructed in relation to broader cultural systems of meaning" (p. 264). They further note that these systems of meaning have been constructed in extremely narrow terms regarding what the vagina should look and feel like. Braun and Kitzinger (2001) found that these females were relating their concerns to the male penis. These females were not worried about their own sexual pleasure, but were instead worried about being too loose or too tight for the pleasure of their male partner. Females' concerns over their own genitals in relation to male sexual pleasure reflects broader cultural systems of meaning. These cultural systems of meaning work to privilege heterosexuality. In

their study, Braun and Kitzinger (2001) articulated an example of how constructions of the body are a site through which heterosexism is perpetuated.

Social constructionists focus on heterosexism and heteronormativity over homophobia. They tend to view sexual discrimination as social processes and practices rather than an individual 'phobia' towards homosexuals. By identifying the ways heterosexism and heteronormativity arise in mundane instances of talk, social constructionists can speak to the larger systems of oppression that are maintained through collective heterosexism and heteronormativity.

Heterosexism has been defined by Braun (2000) as “[the] assumption of heterosexual normalcy, and discrimination based on sexual orientation” (p. 133). Braun (2000) notes that heterosexism occurs in talk through both commission and omission. Through focus groups with women talking about the vagina, Braun (2000) found heterosexism by commission to take shape in “the explicit articulation of heterosexist assumptions” (p. 134). Heterosexism by commission occurs through both portraying homosexuality in a negative manner, and in actively prescribing heterosexuality as normative. Through interviews with adults participating in gay and lesbian awareness training, Peel (2001) identified instances of heterosexism by commission through participants’ positioning of homosexuality as comparable to an abnormality or deficit. This was typically identified in statements such as “[if my child was homosexual] I will always love [them], no matter what [they] are” (Peel, 2001, p. 547). By positioning their love as being somehow “in spite of”, participants imply that being homosexual is an undesirable outcome.

Braun (2000) also identified heterosexism by commission in women’s assumptions that the generic woman is equated with the heterosexual women, and the generic man is equated with the heterosexual man. These women also assumed sexual practices to be equated with

heterosexual practices. Through surveys, Martin (2009) found mothers committed heterosexism by commission by assuming their children were heterosexual. These mothers also privileged heterosexual love, relationships, and families for their children. Martin (2009) notes that “such conversations play a role in constructing children’s understandings of themselves as ‘supposed to be’ heterosexual” (p. 199).

According to Braun (2000), heterosexism by omission refers to the “the lack of disagreement with, or challenge to, heterosexist talk” (p.136). Braun (2000) identified instances of heterosexism by omission in participants’ failure to challenge heterosexist talk, and in the researchers’ failure to follow up on lesbian (and LGBTQ) topics of talk. For example, Braun (2000) noted that participants failed to challenge the underlying heterosexist assumptions in discussions, thus failing to problematize what is perceived as the ‘norm’. Further, even when participants brought up same-sex attraction and arousal, the researcher failed to push the topic further, calling her failure “an immediate retreat to the ‘safe’ (heterosexual) ground of penises” (Braun, 2000, p. 137). By this, the researcher positions discussions around same-sex arousal as unsafe, feeling that the only ‘safe’ topics are those that are of a heterosexual nature. For Martin (2009), heterosexism by omission can be identified through a mother’s failure to provide examples of alternative sexualities to her children. For example, in discussing love, relationships, sexuality, and family with their children, these mothers centered all their discussions narrowly on heterosexuality.

Heteronormativity is similar to heterosexism in its privileging and normalization of heterosexuality. Heteronormativity, however, also speaks to the intersection of gender and heterosexuality. According to Seidman (2005), heteronormativity “not only establishes a heterosexual/homosexual hierarchy but also creates hierarchies among heterosexualities,

resulting in hegemonic and subordinate forms of heterosexuality” (p. 40). Not only does society privilege heterosexuals, but society also privileges a particular type of heterosexual.

Heteronormativity points to the behaviours that reflect society’s conception of the ‘appropriate’ male and ‘appropriate’ female. Heteronormativity contributes to the rigid social categorizations of the heterosexual masculine male, and heterosexual feminine female as ‘normal’ (Jackson, 2005).

In sum, the existing social constructionist literature shows that heterosexism and heteronormativity are not always obvious or overt. It is clear from Braun (2000), Peel (2001), and Martin (2009), that heterosexism is frequently constructed within everyday conversations. Heterosexism is also frequently constructed alongside heteronormativity. Through a social constructionist focus on the processes and practices that construct heterosexism and heteronormativity, we are able to uncover its permeation among even those who are supposedly ‘tolerant’ and ‘liberal’. The purpose of my research was to uncover how heterosexism and heteronormativity come to be produced, reproduced, and maintained within primary school classrooms. Like previous social constructionist research, my research sought to identify and challenge heterosexism and heteronormativity by investigating the social processes and practices that maintain it. In doing so, my research points to a larger system of oppression that maintains heterosexism and heteronormativity. This is in opposition to essentialist perspectives, which suggest heterosexism and heteronormativity are simply maintained by homophobic individuals.

### **The Social Construction of Sexuality in Schools**

Schools are an important site for the production of heterosexism and heteronormativity. Heterosexuality and heteronormativity are privileged through sexual regulation, which is referred to as “a linked set of practices which authorize certain kinds of sexual behaviours and sexual

identities as not only legitimate but unremarkable” (Prentice, 1994, p.1). Although most schools attempt to tackle issues of bullying and social exclusion, schools still fail to provide a safe environment for gay and lesbian students (Sears, 1992). Heterosexism and heteronormativity permeate the content of the curriculum, the resources used, and the social relationships that develop at school.

Schools produce heterosexism and heteronormativity within the official curriculum. The sexual education curriculum centres its lessons on the anatomical differences between males and females, with a focus on coital intercourse for reproductive purposes. This heterosexual and reproductively based curriculum renders more complex forms of sexuality (such as non-heterosexuality and sex for pleasure) invisible. In teaching healthy relationships, the curriculum tends to idealize a family that is nuclear, and consisting of heterosexual parents with their biological children (Adams, 1994). Through interviews with gay and lesbian students, Donovan and Hester (2008) found participants to be frustrated by the lack of same-sex relationship examples outlined in the curriculum. These students suggested that the lack of relevant examples led to difficulties in understanding their own relationships and sexual experiences. Analyzing the sex education curriculum in the United States, McNeill (2013) found that even when gay and lesbian sexual orientations were discussed, they were positioned as less than ideal. Finally, through a similar analysis, Lamb, Lustig, & Graling (2013) found the pleasurable aspects of sexuality to be largely invisible in the curriculum. When sex for pleasure was discussed, discussions were often centred on issues of unprotected sex, rape, and STDs. By privileging heterosexuality and sex for reproductive purposes, the curriculum contributes to heterosexism and heteronormativity in schools.



Schools also produce heterosexism and heteronormativity in the resources used within the institution. Reviewing previous research on heterosexism, Chesir-Teran (2003) found that the movies, posters, and decorations used in schools fail to depict sexual diversity. Instead, such visuals often depict and promote heterosexual couples and families. Analyzing Canadian sexuality textbooks, Temple (2005) found discussions of same-sex relationships and sexual behaviours to be framed in a negative manner. These textbooks discussed same-sex experiences largely within the context of sexually transmitted diseases, sexual abuse, and prostitution. Braun and Kitzinger (2001) analyzed dictionaries and medical texts to see how both male and female genitals were defined. Women's genitals were discussed in terms of passivity and absence. The vagina was frequently defined as an entrance or recipient for the penis. Male genitals were discussed in terms of activity and presence. The penis was often defined in terms of its active functions (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001). The definitions of genitals in these texts overall reinforced ideas about gender and heterosexuality, through the heteronormative assumption that males and females are meant to engage in sex together. Sexual diversity and sex for pleasure is made invisible through definitions' main focus on the heterosexual and reproductive functions of genitals. By providing students with such resources, schools contribute to heterosexism and heteronormativity.

Finally, schools also produce heterosexism and heteronormativity in the types of social relationships that develop at school. Through their relationships with peers, students come to learn what is 'appropriate' and expected of them in regards to their gender and sexuality. Through ethnographic methods, Kehily and Nayak (1997) identified the use of humour amongst young males as central to the performance of heterosexual masculinity. Humour was used amongst young males at school in order to tease peers who displayed effeminate behaviours, and

who failed to perform sexually with the opposite sex. Kehily and Nayak (1997) also found young males bond over making sexual comments to their female peers; often referencing sexual intercourse. Young males who did not engage in humorous teasing at school were often excluded from peer groups (Kehily & Nayak, 1997). Conducting interviews with gay students, Drummond (2007) found that most gay males were aware of their sexual orientation from a young age, and noted the salience of the heterosexist and heteronormative culture amongst peer groups at school. These males expressed concern for the psychological, emotional, or even physical abuse that may arise if their peers found out they were uninterested in females (Drummond, 2007). Using ethnographic methods, Myers and Raymond (2010) found female students to also be active in regulating 'appropriate' (heterosexual) behaviour for themselves and others. For example, young females were praised by their peers for being 'girlie' and having an interest in boys. On the contrary, 'non-girlie' females were defined as being uninterested in boys and were injuriously called 'square' as a result (Myers & Raymond, 2010). Through similar ethnographic methods, Renold (2006) found females gained social status amongst their peers by continuously engaging in discussions about who "liked" whom, spending time setting up and breaking up heterosexual relationships through letters, and participating in sexualized playground games. In sum, both young male and female students gain social status amongst their peers for displaying and regulating heterosexuality. This contributes to the salience of heterosexism and heteronormativity amongst social groups in schools.

The literature has shown that schools contribute to heterosexism and heteronormativity through the content of the curriculum, the resources used, and the social relationships that develop at school. Through these three means, heterosexism is produced through the continuous privileging of heterosexuality, and the subsequent marginalization of gay and lesbian

orientations. Heteronormativity is produced by expecting students to be a particular ‘type’ of heterosexual. Heterosexuality and heteronormativity come to be taken for granted within the school environment, such that they are constructed as natural and normal (Prentice, 1994).

Unfortunately, heterosexism oppresses gay and lesbian students and heteronormativity oppresses many heterosexuals. The heterosexism and heteronormativity in schools fails to provide students with an inclusive and safe environment within which to learn.

### **The Social Construction of Sexuality via Teachers**

Primary schools are mandated by a sexual education curriculum. The effectiveness of the curriculum relies on how teachers put it into practice (Cohen et al., 2004). According to Kehily (2002), personal beliefs, training, and experiences guide how teachers talk about sexuality with their students. Agee (1999) suggests that these influences contribute to “self-censorship”, which is particularly common amongst teachers when discussing a sensitive topic with their class. Due to a fear of negative reactions from parents and religious groups, and a presumption of childhood innocence, teachers contribute to heterosexism and heteronormativity through the language they use to talk about sexuality.

In teaching about sexuality, teachers render many topics invisible. Epstein et al. (2003) found that teachers were cautious in addressing topics of sexuality beyond the curriculum. As a result, these teachers were hesitant to allow students control over the direction of classroom discussions. For example, when a student suggested that people may engage in sex for pleasure, the teacher chose to ignore the comment. Instead, she brought discussions of sex back to reproduction. Through surveys on Canadian teachers, Cohen et al. (2004) found a discrepancy between teachers’ support for sexual education and its implementation. They found that teachers claim to support a diverse array of topics in sexual education, but that they fail to provide such

diversity in their own lessons. Cohen et al. (2004) found teachers were more likely to address topics such as anatomy and development, while avoiding topics such as sex for pleasure and homosexuality. Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2011) found through interviews that teachers are often open to informing their young students that families are unique and diverse. These types of conversations were particularly common on occasions such as Mother's Day and Father's Day, where teachers talked about the prevalence of different family structures. However, these researchers also note that these discussions of diversity did not include any reference to same-sex parents. Despite their support for inclusive sexual education, teachers tend to render sexual diversity and sex for pleasure as invisible.

Teachers reference different reasons for limiting their talk about sexuality in their classrooms. The first reason reflects a fear of negative reactions amongst parents and religious groups. According to Puchner and Klein (2012), teachers are engaged in a "risk-benefits tension", wherein they are constantly weighing whether the relaying of information to students is worth potential backlash. Epstein et al. (2003) found many teachers to be worried about parents reacting negatively to how teachers talk about sexuality in the classroom. Such fear is compounded by the fact that sexual education is the only subject requiring parental permission – speaking directly to its sensitive nature (Epstein et al., 2003). Similarly, Martino & Cumming-Potvin (2011) termed the fear of parental backlash the "enforced heteronormative normalization through parental surveillance (p. 486). Perceived parental surveillance makes teachers more likely to stick to more conservative and normative examples of sexuality in their teachings (Epstein et al., 2003). Through interviews, DePalma and Jennett (2010) demonstrated that teachers worry about negative reactions amongst parents if sexual diversity is incorporated into their lessons. However, these authors note that no teachers worried about negative reactions

arising from their failure to include sexual diversity. Many teachers also worried about negative reactions from religious groups upon teaching topics in opposition to religious doctrine- such as premarital sex, divorce, and homosexuality (DePalma & Jennett, 2010). By talking about sexuality in such a limited and confined manner, teachers reproduce heterosexism and heteronormativity in their classrooms.

A second reason behind teachers' tendency to privilege heterosexuality lies in their presumption that young students are innocent or even asexual. Research has outlined how the meaning of childhood has changed drastically over time. For example, Zelizer (1985) documented an important shift in the last century towards constructing childhood as a period of innocence. Robinson (2002) found teachers to perceive their students as "asexual, innocent, and too young to be capable of understanding or dealing with such 'adult' concepts as sexuality", leading teachers to believe sexual topics (especially sexual diversity) were irrelevant to the lives of their students (p. 419). Wallis and VanEvery (2000) found that teachers fail to address sexual diversity due to their assumption that heterosexuality is safer for young children. For example, during a mock wedding project, a young male decided to marry his best friend (also a male). Rather than taking up the notion of a different model of marriage, the teacher prohibited the mock wedding. Teachers decide which areas of sexuality are too 'adult' for children to explore. These 'adult' topics often revolve around sexual diversity.

Due to a fear of negative reactions from parents and religious groups, and a presumption of childhood innocence, teachers discuss sexuality very narrowly in the classroom. In focusing on heterosexuality, teachers omit examples of sexual diversity from the lives of their students. In doing so, teachers contribute to heterosexism and heteronormativity by reproducing heterosexuality as a natural and normal version of sexuality.

## **The Ontario School Curriculum**

Reviewing and comparing the curriculum of both the Public and Catholic District School Board in Ontario allows for an understanding of the institutional mandates that guide teachers. These two school systems in Ontario are mandated to follow the guidelines of the Health & Physical Education Curriculum. This curriculum was revised in 2010 by the Ministry of Education, but the sexual health and development sections still follow the previous version. This curriculum focuses on promoting learning skills such as critical thinking, personal skills, and interpersonal skills. These skills are integrated into lessons around the following topics: physical health, healthy eating, mental health, sexual health, safety and injury prevention, substance use, and human development. For the sexual health and human development sections, teachers are required to inform parents or guardians of the content that will be addressed. Parents and guardians have the option to remove their child from the classroom during sexual education.

Although the Health & Physical Education Curriculum is also taught in the Public system, it is interesting to note that Catholic religious leaders had a great deal of input into its components. In fact, the religious input was so strong in Ontario that attempted revisions to this curriculum in 2010 were rejected. The rejected revisions were those which were in opposition to the Catholic doctrine and its views on marriage, family, and sexuality. Discussion of gay and lesbian orientations were proposed for third grade, while discussions of sex for pleasure were to begin in fifth grade. These specific revisions were rejected by Catholic religious leaders who saw the program as becoming much too radical (Rushowy, 2013).

In grade one, the lessons in sexual health and human development centre on the life cycles of plants, animals, and humans. First grade students also learn about the major parts of the body and their proper names. In grade two, students learn about the similarities and differences

between themselves and others. This includes discussions about gender, body size, and personal hygiene. In grade three, students learn the basic human and animal reproductive processes. Specific focus is placed on the meeting of the sperm and the egg. Third grade students also learn of basic changes in their growth and development from birth to childhood. In grade four, students learn the stages of human development and to identify all of the changes that may occur during each stage. This includes physical, interpersonal, and emotional changes. Healthy relationships and discussions around how to be considerate, how to communicate, and how to love are introduced. Finally, in grade five, students talk about the challenges and responsibilities they experience within relationships. Puberty is also introduced in regards to secondary physical changes such as body hair and body shape. Fifth grade teachers must also teach about the processes of menstruation and spermatogenesis.

The Catholic District School Boards, sponsored by the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, have also developed a more specific family life education program to be used in their schools alongside the Health & Physical Education Curriculum. This program, entitled *Fully Alive*, is to be taught by teachers once a week. The goal of the program is to pass on a distinctly Catholic view of human life, sexuality, marriage, and family (Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009).

In grade one, students learn that they are unique individuals who are created and loved by God. Students then learn that life begins with conception and ends with death. First grade students also learn about love within family and friendship. In grade two, students learn about living in relationships. Here, the family is introduced. The program provides examples of different family types including interracial families, blended families, and adopted families. The program does not provide examples of divorce or same-sex families. In grade three, students

learn what it means to be a sexual male or a sexual female. Students learn about bodily systems, with particular focus on reproductive systems. The program explicitly states that “men and women together create new life” (Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009, p. 58). In third grade, students also learn that when a man and a woman love each other, they express it through sexual intercourse to create new life. In grade four, students learn more about puberty and the changes they may undergo in their development. Finally, in grade five, students learn more specific aspects of sexuality such as ejaculation and menstruation.

Overall, the curriculum found in the Ontario Public School Board and the Catholic District School Board are the same. However, since the Catholic District School Board follows the mandates of both the Health & Physical Education Curriculum as well as the *Fully Alive* program, Catholic schools have more stringent guidelines to teaching sexuality and human development. The *Fully Alive* program comes complete with a program book that provides teachers with more explicit instruction for how to discuss sexuality. Each theme in this book is complete with stories and examples which teachers may provide to their students. The *Fully Alive* program is largely guided by religious content and a focus on God. Guided by only one curriculum, teachers in the Ontario Public School Board do not have as many guidelines in teaching about sexuality and human development.

Providing a review and comparison of these two curricula allows for an understanding of the foundations upon which teachers talk about sexuality in each school board. It is important to note that neither the Health & Physical Education curriculum nor the *Fully Alive* program mandates or prevents discussion of premarital sex, sex for pleasure, divorce, or sexual diversity. Teachers are simply expected to address the topics outlined within the curriculum, and at the appropriate grade level in order to ensure their students meet the curriculum expectations. This



means that teachers are individually responsible for choosing or developing appropriate and effective instructional strategies to help their students meet these expectations.

In sum, it is important to identify all relevant aspects of the curriculum which guide teachers' talk about sexuality. However, teachers evidently have a certain amount of freedom in how they construct their lessons and discussions. It becomes crucial then, to identify the ways in which teachers navigate the curriculum and discuss sexuality with their students.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social constructionism guided this research in uncovering how teachers construct and privilege heterosexuality in their classrooms. Social constructionism is not one unitary perspective which is applied to a range of disciplines, rather, many different versions have been developed and they are also comprised of different tenets. Social constructionism allows for a close examination of the processes and practices which produce, maintain, and contribute to heterosexism and heteronormativity. My research draws upon the social constructionist perspective put forth by Vivien Burr (2003) and Kenneth Gergen (1999).

The first tenet of this theory of social constructionism is that there is no one unitary and authoritative account of the world. There are also “no essences inside things or people that make them what they are” (Burr, 2003, p. 5). Some people may view this as highly threatening, because it suggests that there is nothing secure upon which to base belief and understanding. However, Gergen (1999) suggests that it is liberating, because it means we are not locked into categorizations. This is in opposition to essentialism, which tends to lock people into categories- many of which are highly oppressing (Burr, 2003).

The second tenet of this theory is that “language and all other forms of representation gain their meaning from the ways in which they are used within relationships” (Gergen, 1999, p.48). This means that the individual does not create meaning; meaning is instead created through relationships and interactions. We come into this world wherein there are already pre-existing categories. Thus, “our ways of understanding the world do not come from objective reality but from other people” (Burr, 2003, p. 7).

The third tenet of this theory is that language itself constitutes social life. According to Burr (2003), “the goings-on between people in the course of their everyday lives are seen as the practices during which our shared versions of knowledge are constructed” (p. 4). Social life is produced through language and interaction. This also means that we are active participants in creating the future. We can cultivate the future by generating new meanings in new forms of language and new ways of interpreting the world. This means “challeng[ing] existing traditions of understanding, and offer[ing] new possibilities for action” (Gergen, 1999, p. 49).

The fourth tenet of this theory is a focus on reflexivity. Reflexivity means questioning reality, being open to alternatives of reality, and recognizing the potential for many different stances on reality (Gergen, 1999). Reflexivity also means always questioning our assumptions about how the world appears to be (Burr, 2003). This takes shape in critiquing and challenging the taken-for-granted aspects of our realities (Gergen, 1999). This is done through a recognition that categories in the social world do not necessarily reflect real existing divisions (Burr, 2003). This approach has the ability to question who benefits from our use of language, and who is subsequently hurt or excluded.

This social constructionist theory as put forth by Burr (2003) and Gergen (1999) is particularly applicable to my research as I identified the ways in which teachers construct and

privilege heterosexuality through their strategies in the classroom. First, this theory presumes that categories of sexuality (such as male/female, or heterosexual/homosexual) are arbitrary, and that people experience sexuality in a variety of ways. Second, this theory allows us to understand teachers as producing a certain social world in light of pre-existing categories and frameworks. Third, this theory allows for the understanding that it is the language teacher's use which produces a certain social world. Finally, reflexivity allows us to understand the power relations that arise from this production, and the oppression that may result. Guided by this version of social constructionism, my research answers the following question: How do primary school teachers construct and privilege heterosexuality in their classrooms?

## METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this research, qualitative in-depth and semi-structured interviews elicited how primary school teachers construct sexuality in their classrooms. Qualitative methods were chosen for this study due to their advantage over quantitative methods for gaining a high degree of access into participants' perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Although performing ethnographic research would yield the most accurate data on what actually occurs in the classroom, interviews were chosen as the next best method due to time constraints. Interviews were also chosen over other qualitative methods such as focus groups or online discussions. Focus groups were rejected due to their lack of privacy, as the subject matter has the potential to damage one's social identity. Online discussions would not allow me to build the rapport necessary to discuss the sensitive topic of sexuality. Therefore, interviews were the most suitable choice for building rapport, uncovering relevant themes, and allowing for exploration and elaboration. In order to identify how teachers construct sexuality in their classrooms, creating a

research setting wherein teachers feel comfortable recalling specific experiences and examples was of paramount concern.

### **Participants**

Two participants were initially identified through convenience sampling. These initial participants were a family member and a friend. Next, by seeking assistance through my immediate family members as well as posting on my personal Facebook page, I was able to identify four more participants. Finally, using snowball sampling, I asked each participant if they could refer me to a colleague who they feel would be interested in the research project. From this method, I was able to identify my final two participants. All eight participants were identified over the course of six weeks. The sample size for this research was restricted to eight due to feasibility. For the purposes of this research, primary school teachers were characterized as those who have taught at the fifth grade level and below. All participants were Caucasian. All participants had a university bachelor's degree, and all had also attended teachers college. Thus, all participants were well educated and professional individuals. See Table 1 for basic information regarding each participants.

Table 1

#### *Participants' Teaching Experience*

<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>School Board</b>	<b>Grade(s) Currently Teaching</b>	<b>Grade(s) Previously Taught</b>	<b>Years of Teaching Experience</b>
Mark	Male	Public	4	1 – 8	7
Kathy	Female	Catholic	Special Education	1 – 8	30

Jessica	Female	Catholic	2, 3	1 – 5	4
Maria	Female	Public	Occasional	Junior Kindergarten -12	37
Rachel	Female	Catholic	1	1 – 3	10
Heather	Female	Catholic	2, 3	2 – 6	5
Greg	Male	Catholic	1, 2	Kindergarten - 9	30
Amanda	Female	Catholic	Kindergarten	Kindergarten 1, 3, 4, 5	14

### Procedures

Participants were emailed an information letter which outlined the nature of the study (see Appendix A). Once participants agreed to their involvement, they were also emailed the interview guide (see Appendix B). This interview guide was distributed in advance in order to allow participants sufficient time to reflect upon their experiences in their teaching role. Participants chose a meeting place for the interview. Four interviews took place at the teachers' schools: two took place in the classroom after the school day, and two took place during school hours in a resource room. Three interviews took place in the participants' home. The final interview took place in my home.

Participants reviewed and signed the consent form prior to the interview (see Appendix C). I identified myself as a graduate student, and made it evident that I was eager to learn about teachers' day-to-day tasks and experiences. Before I began recording, I engaged in informal conversations with the participants about their experience as a teacher in order to establish rapport and to make participants feel comfortable. Due to sensitivity and apprehension surrounding talk about sexuality, it was necessary for me to develop rapport with my participants in order to elicit their experiences. All participants stated that they did not feel suited as a source of information for my research, and had concerns regarding their ability to contribute. The most common concern amongst participants was that they were teaching at the primary level, where sexuality is perceived to be a very small aspect of their teachings. I reassured all participants that other participants had expressed similar concerns, but found that once they began discussing their experiences they actually had a great deal to share. This reassurance allowed participants to share their experiences at length.

Interview lengths ranged from forty-five minutes to one hour and forty minutes. The questions were designed to allow participants to reflect upon their teaching experiences and uncover the ways in which teachers talk to their students about topics of sexuality. The nature of the questions allowed participants to elaborate using quotations, examples, and explanations. The interviews were audio-recorded on both a laptop as well as a smartphone. The interviews were recorded by two devices to protect against technological issues. Once it proved that the data effectively recorded on the laptop, the smartphone recordings were deleted. All interviews were accurately transcribed using Express Scribe Pro software.

## Analysis

The underlying epistemological assumption of this research is that the data are “a reflection of the reality that exists in the social world” (Miller & Glassner, 2011, p.125). This realist approach assumes that teachers’ recounting of their classroom experiences was an actual reflection of what occurred in the classroom. The limitations of such an approach must be addressed. First, participants may be affected by social desirability bias – which is the desire to answer questions in a manner that the participant perceives as acceptable to others (Spector, 2004). Thus, the participant may be trying to please me (and future readers of the research) in their responses, rather than provide an account of what they actually say and do in their classrooms. A second limitation of a realist approach is that participants are recalling experiences and examples from memory. This once-removed account of the classroom experience could very well be altered with the passing of time. Although these issues are important to recognize, interviews were the most practical and efficient option for my research.

Working under a realist epistemological assumption, interview transcripts were then analyzed inductively. Inductive analysis refers to “the generation and emergence of categories, themes, and patterns that come directly from the data” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 63). I allowed for various themes to arise from the data without allowing preconceived notions and expectations about the data to dictate the themes. This approach consisted of taking multiple passes at the data in order to uncover any and all themes regarding how teachers talk to their students about sexuality.

Thematic coding was used to group the data into relevant themes. Thematic analysis “is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). From my transcripts, I began cutting and pasting responses from participants that

reflected a pattern. I began grouping clusters of responses together in separate documents, eventually giving each of these clusters a title. This title reflected a theme, which is “something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Therefore, when a response became patterned it then became a theme of my research. Due to the richness of my data there were a multitude of themes. These themes then needed to be reduced in order to provide a focused and concise direction for the research paper. The themes that remained were only those which reflected teachers’ accounts of what they said in their classroom. From this coding strategy, four major themes arose in regards to how teachers talk to students about sexuality. The first reflected a reliance on scientific explanations to explain sexuality. The second took form in teachers’ deferring to others. The third was a reliance on faith and religion. Finally, the fourth theme was an avoidance based on the presumption of childhood innocence.

### **Ethics**

This research secured ethics approval via the Research Ethics Board (REB) at Wilfrid Laurier University. In order to secure this approval, the TCPS2 (Tri-Council Policy Statement 2: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans) tutorial was successfully completed. Since participants were not asked to speak on behalf of their school board, ethics was not required from the Board of Education. Rather, participants were simply recounting some of their day-to-day experiences in the classroom.

Participants were guaranteed absolute confidentiality and privacy throughout the research, in the transcription process, and in the final research paper. All participants had the option to permit or deny the use of quotations in the final report, and all consented to their use. Names of participants were removed following transcription, and any potentially identifying



information was removed from the research paper. Precautions were taken throughout this process in order to prevent unwanted identification. Identifying information (i.e. school board, college attended, student names, etc.) attained throughout the interview process was made available only to myself, and if necessary, to my research supervisor, Dr. Jeffrey Aguinaldo. The transcribed data may have some identifying information in it, and was therefore kept in a safe and secure location. In order to ensure confidentiality in the research paper, all participants were given a pseudonym.

In order to honour their privacy and confidentiality in the study, the participants were free to end their participation at any time throughout the interview process. Participation in this research was voluntary. Participants were not obligated to respond to any questions which they may have felt uncomfortable answering. Participants were also provided with my contact information if they had further questions that were not addressed during the interview process. Participants were informed that they could use this information to contact me in December, 2014 in order to receive a copy of the final paper.

## FINDINGS

Four themes presented themselves after analyzing the data. These themes are a reflection of the strategies used by teachers to discuss topics surrounding sexuality. Both the Public school teachers and the Catholic school teachers used similar strategies. Only one strategy was adopted uniquely by Catholic school teachers.

The first theme reflects a reliance on science to talk about sexuality and to articulate explanations for students. Teachers focus on biological processes and reproduction as the basis for talk about sexuality. Emotions are portrayed as the foundation for relationships, which are in

turn described as the arena within which reproduction takes place. This then equates emotions, love, and relationships with reproduction. By relying on science to talk about sexuality, there is a subsequent lack of discussion surrounding sexuality for pleasure. Thus, sexuality is purposively reproductive.

The second theme took shape in teachers' deferring to others. Most frequently, teachers defer students to parents to discuss sexual topics perceived by teachers to be uncomfortable or inappropriate for the age group. Teachers also defer students to a wide variety of administrative bodies, as well as call upon a teacher of the opposite-sex to be present at certain times.

A third theme was adopted uniquely by Catholic teachers. This strategy diverts discussions back to Catholic virtues- such as love, compassion, and acceptance- instead of discussing sexuality at length. This strategy is often utilized when teachers are dealing with sexual topics that are discouraged by Catholic doctrine. Catholic school teachers are likely to adopt a religious lens in discussing sexuality with their students.

The fourth theme took shape in the assumption of childhood innocence. Teachers avoid discussing certain sexual topics, suggesting that students are too young to understand. Teachers also dismiss the relevance of many areas of sexuality to the lives of their students. Rather, children are portrayed by teachers as in need of protection, and as deserving of an innocent and carefree childhood. Teachers actively avoid certain topics of sexuality that they feel may taint the innocence of their students. Thus, the "young and innocent child" justification is provided as a strategy to avoid answering many student questions or concerns.

### **The Reliance on Scientific Explanations**

All teachers rely on scientific explanations of sexuality in many instances. Teachers state that they feel more comfortable discussing aspects of sexuality from a scientific perspective. This

is particularly evident in their focus of classroom discussions on the process of conception and the physical changes that occur during puberty. All eight teachers focus their sexuality lessons on providing students with the correct anatomical terminology to be used for their body parts. For example, many teachers suggest that their goal is to instruct students to refer to a baby as being inside the uterus, rather than using phrases such as “a baby is in mommy’s tummy”. Jessica explains how she conducts her lessons:

In terms of stuff like sex in general, I wouldn’t say we do that much about it. Like they know what a baby is, how the baby comes out because I’ve shown them pictures like in the textbook. And they know how a baby’s fed- again in the textbook. Um, but that’s kind of the glue to it. Another way is talking about you know... how our parts are different, I guess. I guess that’s more sex related but you know like women have a womb and that’s why they can have a baby. Boy’s don’t, that’s why they can’t. You know... just talking about you know... how we are different. For example like “look at your dad’s hands and your mom’s hands”. “Your dad’s are probably more like bigger”, you know?

Many teachers suggested they feel it is more appropriate to use biology to explain sexuality in the younger grades. One teacher spoke specifically about using videos of monarch butterflies to explain conception and development to her students. The use of monarch butterflies was preferred over explaining conception and development in humans because butterflies were seen as a more appropriate example for young students.

When conception and development amongst humans is discussed, teachers provide basic physiological explanations. By highlighting the physiological aspects of sexuality, teachers are often able to avoid discussing other aspects of sexuality- including sexual behaviour. Greg talks about keeping explanations of conception simple:

I’ll tell you... the word sperm does come into it and then the word egg. Like “a woman’s egg and a man’s seed meet and it grows into a baby in the uterus”. So you try to simplify it for the kids. Keep it real simple.

Heather describes how she promotes a scientific viewpoint:

So we talk about how the sperm and ovum meet. So “the sperm comes from the dad and the ovum comes from the mom and then from the minute they meet, it’s called conception and you’re a human being”. So I kind of talk about it in a way like “isn’t it fascinating... you started off as one cell!” and I kind of promote more of a scientific point of view. Like... “Ok but this is how you started and then you became a person”, right? So that’s... we kind of take away the sex from it. Like we kind of extract that at this age.

Here, Heather describes how the actual act of coital intercourse is entirely extracted from the discussion she has with her students about conception. By focusing on the moment when the sperm meets the egg, Heather avoids explaining any process by which this might occur- such as coital intercourse, or artificial insemination. By suggesting that “we kind of take the sex away from it”, Heather suggests that her scientific explanation allows her to avoid discussing intimacy. Interestingly, in failing to relay the processes by which conception might occur, Heather assumes that her students will not already know about, or ask questions regarding the processes by which conception can occur.

When sexual intercourse is directly addressed by teachers, it is discussed within the context of reproduction only. When asked if sexual intercourse is ever discussed in terms of pleasure, Kathy explains:

No, no. because you know what? Because if... and I remember reading this in the document... they said if they talk about sex alone then it becomes singular. So sex is never spoken about singularly. It’s taught... it’s taught and it’s spoken about in the context of a family. “When two people get together you know... they create”.

Here, Kathy reports that sexual intercourse, when it is talked about, is discussed in the context of two people coming together to procreate. Thus, sexual intercourse is presented as entirely purposive- as being a means to an end. Purposive explanations of intercourse not only fail to address the pleasurable aspects of sexuality, but they render invalid any sexual behaviour that does not result in conception.

These teachers report that discussion of the emotional aspect of sexuality (such as intimacy and love) is reverted to talk about reproduction. Intimacy and love are explained as the foundation of relationships, which are in turn described as the key function for reproduction.

When asked how students learn about romantic love, Kathy explains:

They know love is when you have two people who love each other and they're going to save themselves for marriage... and in the confines of marriage you have sex in order to procreate and have children.

This is a specific example of how learning about romantic love is directly tied to reproduction.

Similarly, Jessica explains to her students that people decide they want to have children because they have "so much love". Again, love is positioned as having a direct function for reproduction.

Finally, Heather suggests that this connection between emotions, relationships, and reproduction is particularly salient in the Catholic school board. Heather says:

So "you're in love, you get married, you have intercourse to have babies to grow your family... which you then continue to love". That is the only way it's introduced and that's the only context we discuss it in because premarital sex is not an option for Catholics.

Heather suggests that she is confined by the Catholic doctrine which discourages premarital sex, leading her to describe sex as a purposive act to create a family within the institution of marriage.

Interestingly, none of the teachers discuss alternative means by which families may be created- such as through adoption, artificial insemination, or surrogacy. Rachel speaks to a particularly interesting situation that occurred with a colleague:

When you're introducing having a baby you talk about how a man and a woman fall in love and they get married and have a child. And the little girl got upset and said "no, my two mommys had me". And she and the teacher... or actually... well the teacher wasn't arguing with her but she was sticking to her guns. The teacher kept saying "no, it's when a man and a woman get together and that's when they..." you know? And she said the little girl was so upset... but more angry than upset at the teacher for stating this. Then I think she followed up with the parents and they said "well this is what we've taught her".

This particular teacher clearly did not feel comfortable addressing other means by which a couple may produce a child. The teacher dismissed the experience of this young student by presenting heterosexual coital intercourse as the only means by which a child can be conceived.

By discussing sexuality from a scientific standpoint, teachers are able to describe some aspects of sexuality in detail while others aspects are made invisible. In the younger grades, teachers use scientific explanations to discuss conception without mentioning the processes by which it may occur. In grades where sexual intercourse is introduced, teachers focus specifically on its reproductive purposes. This strategy makes the pleasurable aspects of intercourse invisible. This strategy also delegitimizes any type of sexual behaviour not based in reproduction, including masturbation, sex for pleasure, and gay and lesbian sex.

### **Deferring to Others**

All teachers spoke frequently of deferring students to others for certain types of discussions on sexuality. Teachers often enact this strategy when the topics of self-pleasure, sexual intercourse, and sexual diversity arise in the classroom. All eight teachers recalled feeling uncomfortable being the person tasked with addressing students' questions surrounding sexuality. Therefore, the strategy of deferring to others is utilized when a topic or student's question is not directly outlined within the curriculum.

For all of the teachers, the most common strategy is to direct students back to their parents. In doing so, teachers are able to avoid discussing topics that make them feel uncomfortable, or that they feel unprepared to discuss. For instance, encountered with a young student attempting to comprehend exactly how the sperm and egg come to meet, Heather offers a scripted response of "you know, that's such a very special question that you need to ask your mom and dad to

answer because they could answer it way better than we could". Kathy, when faced with a nearly identical question, states that:

So unless it tells me in here (curriculum) to say that you know, "sperm will go into the females... into the vagina and you know, makes its way up"... they sort of have to put two and two together. I'll say you know, "you can ask your parents exactly if you want".

Similarly, Greg explains:

If there's a question a child presents you say well "and they were cuddling!" you know? Or "what do you think they were doing Mr. Jones?" You know? And that's quite a bit, and I go "you know, I'm not quite sure!" I says "that would be a good question to ask mom and dad". But you know so I'm not avoiding it but I don't know... you've got to be careful with especially grade one and two because you wonder where they're going with that. So the sexuality part is...is... it has to be handled as it comes up, ok? That's the way I do it. If it gets too... you know... if it starts getting really technical and the kid gets very specific about things that I don't feel comfortable talking about I won't. I won't. I'll direct them to their parents.

Heather, Kathy, and Greg defer to parents to provide an explanation for how conception may occur. Through this strategy, teachers not only avoid discussing coital intercourse, but they also avoid explaining other possible methods of conception (such as artificial insemination or surrogacy). Throughout the course of the interview, these teachers provided specific examples of the things they did not feel comfortable talking about with their students. These teachers direct students to their parents to talk about homosexuality, intimacy (beyond kissing), menstruation, and menopause. Both a lack of comfort and a lack of knowledge surrounding these topics were cited as motivation for deferring students to their parents.

Many teachers spoke to how important, thoughtful, and valid student questions about sexuality are. Because of this, one teacher refers to the deferral to parents as a "double edged sword". Kathy elaborates by asking "like how many kids are going to go to their parents, right? And talk about it?" Although all teachers expressed the need to defer to parents in some situations, Kathy acknowledges the consequences of doing so. When teachers defer to parents,

students are very unlikely to have their important, thoughtful, and valid questions and concerns addressed. Rachel struggled with this as well, stating that:

The other thing is that they're eventually going to hear them. They might as well hear them from somebody who... whose informed and knowledgeable as opposed to hearing it from kids on the playground, right? And like... hearing the actual truth as opposed to other things.

Regardless of the desire for students to receive the most legitimate and accurate response to their questions about sexuality, teachers continuously defer to parents to deliver this information. Many teachers reported that telling students to talk to their parents was their "go-to line".

Many teachers note that coital intercourse, sex for pleasure, and sexual diversity are sensitive topics for which teachers fear receiving negative feedback. When deferring to parents following a question about sexual intercourse, Sarah explains her reasoning:

Well because of the nature of it, and it's the one area where parents have a strong opinion... I don't deviate from the curriculum. You know, if it's outside the curriculum, I don't do it. I don't mention it. And that was grade three so I thought well, you know... "you should ask your parents".

Parents are given the option to have their children removed from the classroom during sexual education lessons. Incidents of removal served to remind these teachers that sexuality is a highly sensitive area of discussion. To avoid negative feedback from parents, these teachers rarely discuss topics that are not explicitly outlined in the curriculum. Rachel feels that "the parents hold you to the curriculum", and thus any deviation may elicit an opportunity for negative feedback. As a public school teacher, Mark notes that he regularly encounters students from religious backgrounds that are known to take issue with homosexuality. As a result, he identifies a level of risk in openly discussing homosexuality with students:

I mean it's a contentious issue (discussing homosexuality with students). I mean you can get parents on the other end of the spectrum too who are very conservative about that and think that you're promoting the message of homosexuality. So I haven't been in that



situation myself, but I know lots of others that have, and people can be really narrow minded about that.

Although not all teachers have personally experienced negative feedback from parents, they all fear the possibility. As a result of this fear, these teachers often find it best to simply put the responsibility for certain discussions back onto the parents.

Teachers also found it necessary to defer to parents regarding students' sexual behaviour at school. Maria spoke of a time where she witnessed one of her second grade students masturbating behind the puppet theatre during free-time. When I asked her how she addressed this behaviour, Maria stated that she told the student "that's really not appropriate for school and you can talk to your mom about it at home". In this situation, Maria took it upon herself to contact the parents in order to ensure that the behaviour was going to be addressed at home. By deferring this student to their parents and ensuring the parents were also aware, Maria successfully avoided having any discussions surrounding self-pleasure and masturbation with her student. Rather, she left it up to the parents to be addressed.

In some situations, teachers deferred to other members of faculty to discuss sexuality. This strategy was used to provide students with resources (such as counselling), or to gather information regarding appropriate conduct. The use of this strategy is often fuelled by a fear of saying something 'inappropriate' or 'incorrect' as mandated by the curriculum or the Catholic doctrine. Jessica speaks of this situation:

I had one boy... the issue that came up it was last week, and he brought me a magazine and it said something about gay in it and it was like a Today's Parent and there was something about gay. And he said "Miss Smith, why is that in here?" and then I said "oh can we just talk about that later?" and then he didn't come back with it. So like I still need to address it with him, but I'm still thinking of like... because I like... there's certain things I can say and can't say, right? So I'm kind of trying to say what's appropriate I guess.

Jessica continues:

I don't remember what it said because it was like a really busy day but he had come up... that's part of why I couldn't talk to him at the moment. He said something about... I don't know if it was like about gay parents or something gay related, like "you can be gay", but it's also like saying it's not wrong, you know what I mean? Like I would never say "it's wrong" because I don't think it's wrong, and our religion doesn't say it's wrong. It says the action is wrong. It's something that I would actually have to think about... and that one is one where I'd really like to find out from my administrator what I am allowed to say and what I am not... because otherwise you might have a parent phone call saying "why did you tell my child this?" right?

Similarly, when asked if she would feel comfortable providing examples of gay and lesbian relationships to her students, Rachel admits:

I tend to just avoid it. You know what? I guess because of the board's position on it I would avoid that completely. I would. You know what? Obviously if it came up in the classroom then I would seek the advice of my principal on how to handle it.

Here, Jessica and Rachel speak to the need to contact someone in an administrative position for guidance on explaining homosexuality to a student. The fear of negative feedback arising from parents who do not wish for their child to be informed about gays and lesbians is also noted. In this situation, both Jessica and Rachel simply avoid talking to their students about sexual diversity until they receive proper instruction from their superiors. By deferring particular types of discussion about sexuality, teachers inadvertently 'mark' these topics as 'inappropriate' or even 'illicit'.

A final strategy used by teachers to defer to others was by asking a colleague of the opposite gender to discuss sexuality with their students. The main reason behind this strategy is that teachers often feel uncomfortable discussing certain topics with their opposite gender students. Teachers also suggest that their students may feel more comfortable talking about sexuality with a same gendered teacher. All teachers speak to the importance of having a role model of each gender available to every student. Thus, female teachers often defer to male teachers when male students have questions regarding sexuality, and vice versa. Mark, amongst

others, spoke to the practice of splitting students into their respective gender groups in order to discuss topics of a sexual nature. Although this is not necessarily a mandated practice, it is often taken up by teachers in order to increase levels of comfort amongst both teachers and students.

Mark explains:

I had to sit in years ago with a bunch of grade six boys... and that was a female teacher that... she knew her boys had some immature tendencies and she wasn't comfortable doing it with them. So she asked that I sit and watch the video and just answer any questions after and it was no big deal. But that's really dependent on the students' comfort level and the teacher's comfort. But definitely having a male and female around is super important.

Likewise, Kathy speaks specifically about the needs held by boys:

For some boys... oh my God they need a male role model. They need a good male role model and just need a guy. They need somebody. They may have a perfectly fine dad but that male influence in their life all day is something they need. It's just a different approach you know? Guys teach differently sometimes and I think it's just how they come across to some of the boys.

And in the words of Maria:

I guess we always just assume that the girls would feel more comfortable with the women or maybe that a woman would be more understanding of what a girl's body is going through... and then same with the boys.

In suggesting that male teachers are better suited to teach male students about sexuality, and female teachers are better suited to teach female students about sexuality, normative gender binaries are presupposed. A clear distinction between male sexuality and female sexuality is being reproduced. Interestingly, many of the teachers noted that the separation of students by gender category is often impossible due to the limited number of male teachers at the primary level. Many of the female teachers express frustration with this, noting their desire to have a male role model for their students. However, a lack of available male teachers may translate to a lack of information provided to male students.

Overall, the teachers reported deferring to parents, other members of faculty, and opposite gender teachers in order to address certain areas of sexuality. This strategy is adopted when the topics of self-pleasure, sexual intercourse, and sexual diversity arise in the classroom. The teachers identify a fear of negative feedback from parents, a lack of personal comfort, and institutional mandates as motivation for their use of this strategy.

### **The Reliance on Faith and Religion**

The Catholic school teachers often rely on faith and religion to talk to their students about sexuality. This strategy is particularly utilized when tasked with discussing homosexuality. Although homosexuality is not explicitly prohibited from being discussed in the classroom, the topic is not outlined as a talking point in the *Fully Alive* program. Further, the Catholic doctrine also discourages homosexual behaviour, causing teachers to feel more apprehensive about discussing this topic with their students. Kathy sums up the Catholic mandate with the following:

All members of the Catholic community- teachers, family members, children- are to support students in Ontario Catholic schools to live according to faith values... which are often at odds with the prevailing values of society.

Because they are employed by the Catholic school board, teachers feel it necessary to adhere to the Catholic doctrine with respect to homosexuality. All of the teachers expressed that their personal opinion of homosexuality does not necessarily align with Catholic beliefs. Kathy elaborates:

I'm employed by the Catholic school board so my opinions right now are personal. So when I'm in the teaching profession, teaching mode, then I teach to the documents. I teach to the doctrine. Yes, we are bound by this (curriculum). Do I have other opinions of it? Absolutely. But you know, I get paid by the Catholic school board.

Catholic teachers use religion in two ways: as an excuse not to talk about certain areas of sexuality, and as a lens through which to discuss sexuality.

Catholic teachers report using religious “blanket statements” in their classroom when talking about family. These statements include things such as “your family is love and God is love”, as well as “Jesus loved everybody, so we have to love everybody too”. Many Catholic teachers spoke about how such statements provide a quick and easy response to many of their students’ questions or concerns- particularly regarding same-sex relationships. Religion was also used when explaining sexual intercourse to students. Kathy described sexual intercourse for her students as “two people get together who love each other and want to share God’s gift of a family”. Kathy went on further to note that she relied on such statements when a topic made her uncomfortable, allowing her to “skirt around it pretty good”. For many teachers, faith and religion are used to respond to students’ questions about sexuality without having to elaborate further on the topic. In essence, the topic or issue is largely avoided.

When approached by students who are beginning to identify as homosexual or question their sexual orientation, teachers report that they do not disregard a student’s comments or concerns. Rather, because of the Catholic doctrine, they simply need to be more strategic in the ways in which they respond. Kathy explains:

I remember him coming to me and saying you know “I’m not like everybody else I feel different”. Without sort of you know, sort of probing... at that time too it was a bit uncomfortable for me and I says to him you know what? “We are who we are... we’re born in God’s image and you have to follow what’s right in your heart and your mind”. I say and you know what? “You will find someone if... if that’s what you want to do. And you’ll live your life in God’s image. Whoever that person is, is up to you. That’s... so that’s kind of how I approach it.

She continues:

God created us in His own image. Who’s to say that God’s not gay? Like you know? There’s just... there’s so many other ways of handling the children.

These types of responses show that teachers do address homosexuality (to some extent) in their classrooms, but not in an overt manner. In talking about homosexuality, the Catholic teachers

tend to revert the discussion back to the love that God has for all people, effectively avoiding discussing the technicalities of homosexual behaviour, identity, and experience. In discussing the salience of God's love, teachers also avoid moralizing homosexuality. Although Catholicism positions homosexual behaviour as immoral, teachers do not relay that to students. Therefore, through invoking "blanket statements" of a religious nature, teachers are able to adhere to Catholic doctrine without compromising their own personal beliefs regarding the morality of homosexuality.

Another area where teachers spoke of addressing homosexuality was regarding bullying.

When asked how she responds to bullying in relation to sexual orientation, Kathy states:

We don't necessarily come out and talk about homosexuality, but if that comes up we will ask the student... say you know what? "You have no right to...to...if you're making it into a context of judging a person's sexuality I can say that to a student I says "you really have no right to judge. Jesus didn't judge. What would Jesus do?"

In a similar situation, Heather reacts with:

As a derogatory term, they'll say "you're so gay" and you know... we'll have to discuss what that means and why that's inappropriate and why it hurts people. But I have never been able to say "well homosexuality is ok". It's all in the context of "why did Jesus come to earth? To teach us forgiveness and love, and to tell us not to judge people".

Heather has articulated the struggle faced by many teachers: because homosexuality is immoral under the doctrine of Catholicism, teachers are unable to tell students that homosexuality is acceptable. In bullying situations, religion is used as a strategy to avoid discussing homosexuality at length by simply discussing the importance of Catholic virtues. These virtues include: respect, compassion, love, empathy, and the golden rule. Teachers frequently reiterate these virtues as the foundation for discussing sexuality.

All Catholic teachers stated that they find it helpful to ground their lessons in Catholic doctrine. One teacher discussed the experiences of a colleague who moved into the Public board

after years of working in the Catholic board. This colleague had a very difficult time not relying on faith and religion to guide conversation about sexuality. Similarly, Jessica explains her reliance on faith and religion as a platform for her everyday teachings:

I'm actually in the public board as well. I supply in the public as well, or I did last year and then when I got there like I prefer the Catholic because of the very reason that I love to be able to talk about the religious aspect because it just gives it such a base for like for where faith comes from, and for how to deal with deep issues, you know what I mean? Like someone passes away or like how babies are born... or like why love is so important and like family. So you know... "You're parents are separated but they still love you... they just couldn't work it out" you know? Things like that. So I honestly... like that's a big reason I love teaching in this board.

Catholic teachers take solace in having a solid religious foundation upon which they can discuss sexuality with their students. They feel comforted by the wide array of scriptures, passages, and readings available to support their discussions with students. By using the materials provided within Catholicism (i.e. the Bible), teachers are able to adhere to the Catholic doctrine when discussing sexuality.

Overall, the Catholic doctrine and curriculum is both a constraint and a comfort for teachers in discussing sexuality. Although teachers are not prohibited from speaking about homosexuality, they are aware of the aversion to homosexuality within Catholicism. As a result of this aversion, some teachers use religion as a strategy not to discuss homosexuality. When such discussions cannot be avoided, Catholic teachers take comfort in constructing discussions of sexuality through a faith and religious lens.

### **The Presumption of Childhood Innocence**

All teachers refer to their young students as precious and deserving of an innocent childhood. When discussing sexuality with their students, teachers often suggest a need to "let children be children", and "protect the children at all costs". This strategy is partially linked to

curriculum mandates, such that the curriculum dictates which grade levels can learn which topics. However, this strategy is also utilized in response to teachers' own personal opinions regarding what is appropriate for young students.

Many teachers suggest that although their students seem to have a well-founded understanding of love within the context of a family or friendship, students remain unable to grasp the meaning of romantic love. In every case, age was provided as the reason behind an inability to understand romantic love. As Mark describes:

Basically, their love in the fourth grade is they love pizza. That's all. You know... we've got a few romantic relationships happening. I wouldn't call them loving relationships. It's very much a friendship relationship.

Mark continues:

You're nine years old. So I mean in their world... they... I don't know what they would watch on TV and see this but, in their sense they might have a boyfriend or a girlfriend... but they're just friends.

Even though student-to-student relationships have been identified by the teacher or the teacher became aware of their existence, teachers do not consider these relationships to be romantic. Teachers commonly suggest that at a young age, relationships amongst students are unable to breach the borders of friendship.

Some teachers went as far as to omit personal examples of romantic relationships in the classroom. One teacher purposely introduced her long-term boyfriend to her class as simply a friend. Jessica explains her reasoning behind this strategic introduction:

I just don't like to make it confusing for them. So I just... no. Like they've met him actually. He came in once but I say "it's my friend Derek". I think they're just too young to... like I don't want them to go home and be like "Oh Miss Jessica has a boyfriend". If it was like my husband or fiancée I would. But just... just... I don't know. Like they're so young and I don't want to like... you know what I mean? So, no.



Jessica explicitly points to her students' young age as the reason behind introducing her boyfriend as a friend. Jessica suggests that she would have no issue disclosing her relationship status if her partner were a spouse within a recognized engagement or marriage union. This suggests that Jessica feels her students are too young to understand romantic relationships outside the confines of marriage. Jessica tells another relevant story:

I know a couple years ago I had a colleague I worked with and she's been on the board for like six years now. She actually had a baby in high school while she was in the Catholic board. But, she's amazing. And she had a baby in high school and then so she was never married and doesn't see the dad. And then two years ago she started dating somebody else. Now they're married but she would tell the students that she had a boyfriend, and she even told the kids about how she had a son and so they were very well aware of it. But that was grade seven, so they were a bit older, right?

Jessica suggests that the reason her colleague was able to discuss premarital sex and romantic relationships with her students was because the students were in seventh grade. Due to their older age, Jessica does not position her colleague's disclosure of her relationship status as inappropriate.

Many teachers use, or are at least familiar with the use of a question box for sexuality discussions. Such a box allows students to anonymously ask questions about sexuality over a period of time. Mark explains:

A lot of teachers will have an anonymous question box. So if kids are unsure about something and they're not... they don't want to announce it... they need to know something... they can anonymously put their question or query in the box and then they can talk about it as a class, you know? And I've heard teachers be like... be put in really awkward positions with that. They pull out a question like "what is a g-spot?" and they're not comfortable talking about it. So they'll say "I'll skip that one... next!"

All teachers who used the question box activity reported going through the questions beforehand, preparing scripted responses, and pretending to answer them at random. Teachers are more likely to discard questions that they view as 'inappropriate' for their students. These questions typically revolved around sex for pleasure, self-pleasure, and sexual diversity. Teachers felt most

comfortable answering questions about conception and the physiological changes that occur during puberty and pregnancy.

All of the teachers described having students who they believed were homosexual. However, this did not necessarily translate into an increase in classroom discussions around sexual diversity. In some situations, students' direct questions about sexual orientation were completely dismissed due to their young age. For instance, when a young student asked a teacher "I'm a boy and if I'm not attracted to girls does that mean I'm gay?" the teacher responded with the following:

I remember when I was a little girl and was in grade seven and I used to love going for bike rides and playing. And I says... "right now perhaps this is something that is not part of who you are right now, but it can evolve when you are a teenager or when you are... when you're older". So it's not necessarily wrong, I never say it's wrong.

Rather than speaking to this student about homosexuality, or discussing their potential homosexual orientation with them, this teacher dismissed the student's concerns by citing age as a mitigating factor in sexual identity development. By virtue of students asking questions about homosexuality, teachers are incorrect in dismissing the relevance of sexual diversity to the lives of their students.

Although many teachers are open to introducing the concept of same-sex relationships to students, they avoid discussing these relationships at length. Teachers spent more time discussing other family structures, such as blended families or inter-racial families. Many teachers cite the increasing prevalence of blended families as fuelling their discussions. Many teachers also highlighted the importance of discussing interracial families with their students, suggesting a need to decrease racism in a time of increased diversity. When teachers do discuss same-sex families, most teachers tend to use lines such as "all families look different", and say things such

as “some people have two moms, and some people have two dads”. Further elaboration is rare. For instance, Jessica suggests that her second grade students “don’t have the mental capacity to understand” homosexuality. As a result, she does not discuss same-sex family structure with her class.

Teachers tend to address the derogatory use of the words “gay” and “fag” differently than other put-downs. Mark provides an example of how he addresses the use of derogatory terms in his classroom:

Even the same thing with the word idiot... you know? Like they hear that every day on TV. But they don’t really realize the severity of saying that word. So we’ve had like a conversation as a class about “does anyone know what that actually means?” And they had to look up what an idiot was, and they don’t recognize it. There’s... there’s an aspect of brilliance involved with that. But maybe not with certain other areas. And we look at the word and how hurtful it can be. I mean, even the word “fag” - I have not done this with these kids, they are too young in my mind... but, to look at the etymology... like the word history and how that word came into the English language

Although Mark encourages students to look up the word “idiot” and discover its etymology, he does not feel the same comfort level in allowing them to look up “fag”. Mark refers to the lack of maturity, and the young age of his students as reason for prohibiting such an investigation. In not allowing his students to understand the etymology of the word “fag”, Mark subtly legitimises its use and constructs homosexuality as ‘illicit’ and ‘taboo’ for his young, ‘innocent’ students.

Some teachers also spoke to the institutional mandates that construct children as innocent. Heather discussed how diversity seminars provided to teachers are highly controlled and constrained at the primary level. She notes that the seminars are more all-encompassing in the older divisions, with the unique experiences of gay and lesbian students being addressed. In the primary division, she notes, a large focus is placed on “protecting the children at all costs”.

Heather expresses frustration with this presumption of childhood innocence. She suggests that homosexuality should simply be introduced without discussing associated sexual behaviours.

In assuming that students are too young for certain topics of sexuality to be introduced, teachers are absolved from addressing these topics, which are thus rendered invisible. Teachers discount students' understanding of romantic relationships by presuming their students are too young to understand romantic love. Teachers also render homosexuality invisible by suggesting that students are too young to be informed on the subject. The sexual topics that teachers avoid are constructed as 'illicit' through teachers' assumption that discussing them will taint a child's innocence.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Through qualitative interviews, my research identified the strategies used by primary school teachers to talk to their students about sexuality. Through their use of scientific explanations, teachers delegitimized any type of sexuality not intended for reproduction. By directing students to others to talk about self-pleasure, sexual intercourse, and sexual diversity, teachers effectively silenced discussion around these topics and positioned them as 'non-normative'. For Catholic teachers, religious doctrine was both a constraint and a platform through which to construct sexuality in their classroom. A focus on religious explanations and Catholic virtues allowed Catholic teachers to avoid discussing homosexuality. Finally, by constructing primary students as innocent and asexual, teachers claimed many topics of sexuality- particularly homosexuality- to be irrelevant to students' lives. By identifying these four strategies used by teachers, it became evident that sexuality is constructed in very narrow terms in primary school classrooms.

Teachers constructed adult sexuality in their primary school classrooms in highly heterosexist and heteronormative terms. Overall, the version of sexuality reinforced by teachers was as follows: gender-conforming heterosexual males and females engaging in heterosexual sex for reproductive purposes within monogamous unions. Teachers did not identify any challenges or backlash in presenting this particular version of sexuality. Presenting such normative constructions of sexuality in the classroom privileged certain topics and discussions while precluding others. Teachers thus construct reproductive heterosexuality as the ‘appropriate’, ‘normative’, or ‘ideal’ sexuality.

Teachers colluded with the construction of childhood outlined by Zelizer (1985), in their perception and presumption of innocence and asexuality amongst their young students. Teachers were quick to dismiss student concerns and questions that went beyond the prescriptive sexuality outlined in the curriculum. Teachers were particularly dismissive of students’ curiosity regarding homosexuality. Teachers constructed childhood sexuality as irrelevant through their assertion that many topics were too ‘adult’ for young students to understand or comprehend. By constructing childhood sexuality as irrelevant due to their perceived innocence and asexuality, teachers dismiss the very real experiences and concerns of students going through sexual identity development.

I found certain aspects of the strategies used by teachers to talk about sexuality to be particularly compelling. In relying on scientific explanations of sexuality, teachers continuously brought their talk back to reproduction. This strategy was so salient that it was even used to tie talk about love and relationships back to reproduction. Most striking about teachers’ deferral to others was teachers’ acknowledgement that their students were unlikely to talk to their parents about sexuality. Therefore, teachers were well aware that they were shutting down conversation

completely. Catholic teachers noted a unique struggle, whereby the Catholic doctrine and the *Fully Alive* curriculum were both a comfort and a constraint in talking to students about sexuality. Finally, the presumption of childhood innocence led teachers to render many sexual topics irrelevant to their students' lives. Most concerning about this final strategy is that it was utilized regardless of a student making a topic relevant through their curiosity, questioning, and concerns.

Citing individual homophobia as an explanation for teachers' heterosexist and heteronormative talk is inaccurate. According to Kitzinger (1996), "a relentless focus on the individual decision maker and her choices obscures the material and cultural context that constrain and control these choices" (p. 15). Heterosexist and heteronormative talk reflects a broader social organization that privileges and normalizes heterosexuality. Although teachers are supposed to be 'tolerant' and 'liberal' individuals, the strategies they use to talk to students about sexuality are similar to the arguments used by those against gay and lesbian parenting. Clarke (2001) found people to invoke discussions of religion, childhood innocence, and unnaturalness (i.e. non-reproductive) in attempt to 'justify' their disregard for gay and lesbian parenting. In both the research by Clarke (2001) and myself, the result of using such strategies in talk was the same: the strategies help to maintain the status quo of heterosexuality.

Teachers' heterosexist and heteronormative talk can be taken as evidence that heterosexuality has become entrenched as the benchmark for sexuality. The social construction of heterosexuality has been documented by Katz (1995), who notes that heterosexuality has come to gain its status as the 'normative' sexuality within the last 130 years. This means that the language used by teachers to describe sexuality is historically aligned with the social construction of sexuality. Teachers are simply 'doing' (producing and reproducing) the

historically constructed social organization within which they exist. The way that teachers have constructed sexuality for their students is a mere reflection of a social organization which arranges sexuality in a hierarchy- with heterosexuality at the apex. In fact, all of the teachers spoke of their commitment to equity and inclusivity in their classrooms. Therefore, in line with Kitzinger (1996), it is not teachers' individual beliefs that construct normative sexuality. Rather, teachers' heterosexist and heteronormative talk is a reflection of the language available to them to discuss sexuality with their students.

Teachers are helping to cultivate the future adults of our society. Teachers are in a position of authority in that they are responsible for relaying important knowledge, information, appropriate behaviour, and social values to students. The Health & Physical Education Curriculum, used by both school boards, outlines the importance of creating a supportive social and learning environment for all students. More specifically, the curriculum states the following:

A supportive school environment has a positive impact on students' learning. Students are more able and more motivated to do well and achieve their full potential in schools that have a positive school climate and in which they feel safe and supported. "School climate" may be defined as the sum total of all the personal relationships within a school. When these relationships are founded in mutual acceptance and inclusion and are modelled by all, a culture of respect becomes the norm. Students, teachers, and parents can all benefit from a supportive social environment- from formal measures (e.g. school policies, programs, and guidelines that promote inclusion and the removal of systemic barriers; bullying prevention; clubs and organized support groups) to informal behaviour (e.g. occurring within unstructured peer interaction or free play) (p.8).

Although teachers are required to create an inclusive environment in their classrooms, my research has shown that they fall short. There is tension in the literature regarding the notion of teacher authority. According to Meyer and Rowan (2006), there is a disjuncture between the mandated curriculum and how it is actually carried out by teachers. Meyer and Rowan (2006) suggest that this disjuncture is due to a large degree of autonomy in the teaching profession.

By contrast, Ingersoll (2006) asserts that teachers are highly constrained in their teaching role due to both the curriculum/institutional mandates as well as social expectations. This tension is reminiscent of the debate between the essentialist and social constructionist perspectives. By positioning teachers as autonomous, their heterosexist and heteronormative talk is attributed to individual beliefs. By positioning teachers as constrained, their heterosexist and heteronormative talk is viewed as a result of a broader system of social organization. My research aligns itself more closely with social constructionism and the work of Ingersoll (2006), by showing that teachers' talk is largely constrained by social systems of heterosexual privilege.

Through their talk about sexuality, teachers are imposing the broader social system of heterosexual privilege on their students. Teachers are deciding what is relevant for their students, leading to a very narrow construction of sexuality in primary school classrooms. The data show that students are actively bringing up discussions about sexuality, and that teachers are continuously shutting them down through their use of various strategies. By virtue of their curiosity and inquisitiveness, young students are already making sexuality- including homosexuality- relevant. The sexual education curriculum and discussions within the classroom should be guided largely by what topics students make relevant. Although a tiered and progressive curriculum should remain in place, teachers should never disregard a student's question or concern about sexuality. As was clearly evident through this research, the strategies utilized to shut down discussions of sexuality resulted in a construction of sexuality that was largely heterosexist and heteronormative. By shutting down students and rendering aspects of sexuality irrelevant, primary school teachers are reaffirming an oppressive heterosexist and heteronormative social organization.



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## APPENDIX A

Wilfrid Laurier University

**Information Letter**

Researcher: Anna Spengen, MA student  
spen9060@mylaurier.ca  
Department of Sociology, Wilfrid Laurier University

Supervisor: Dr. Jeffrey Aguinaldo, PhD  
jaguinaldo@wlu.ca  
Department of Sociology, Wilfrid Laurier University

**Purpose of the Study:**

You are invited to participate in my research study on teacher's talk about sexuality. More specifically, the purpose of this study is to uncover the different kinds of talk that teachers employ to discuss this subject matter during informal, everyday classroom discussions in their primary school classrooms.

**Information:**

Participants are invited to participate in a one-on-one interview, the total duration of which will be approximately 1 to 1.5 hours in length. During this time, you will be interviewed about the discussions you have with your students about sexuality. The interviews will be conducted in a place of your preference (i.e. your home, a coffee shop, etc.). All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed.

**Confidentiality:**

Several steps will be taken to protect your anonymity and identity. While the interviews will be voice-recorded, the tapes will be destroyed upon transcription. The transcribed interviews will NOT contain any mention of your name, and identifying information from the interview will be removed. If any quotations are used in the research report, you will be given a pseudonym to protect your identity. Further, anyone mentioned by you in the interview will also be given a pseudonym. The interview data will be kept in a secure room at Wilfrid Laurier University, to which only the main researcher and supervisor will have access.

**Contact:**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Anna Spengen, at [spen9060@mylaurier.ca](mailto:spen9060@mylaurier.ca), Or Dr. Jeffrey Aguinaldo, at [jaguinaldo@wlu.ca](mailto:jaguinaldo@wlu.ca). This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board, tracking number 2907.

**If you would like to participate or if you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact the researcher via email: [spen9060@mylaurier.ca](mailto:spen9060@mylaurier.ca)**

**Participant Contact Information:**

I would like to receive a copy of the final research report upon project conclusion:

Email/Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### *Background Information*

- With what school board are you employed?
- What grade are you currently teaching?
- What grade(s) have you previously taught?
- How long have you been employed as a teacher?

### *Love & Institutions*

- Are the concepts of love and family incorporated into the curriculum?
- How do you discuss the concept of love with your students?
- How do you discuss the concept of divorce with your students?
- How do you discuss family structure with your students?
- How do your colleagues discuss these things with their students?

### *Health & Sex*

- Is the concept of sex incorporated into the curriculum?
- How do you discuss sex with your students?
- How do you discuss health with your students?
- How do you discuss puberty with your students?
- How do you discuss self-esteem and body issues with your students?
- How do your colleagues discuss these things with their students?

### *Occasions & Events*

- How do you discuss marriage with your students?
- How do you discuss Valentine's Day with your students? How is it celebrated?
- How do you discuss Halloween and costumes with your students? How is it celebrated?
- How do you discuss Mother's and Father's Day with your students? How is it celebrated?
- How do your colleagues discuss/celebrate these things with their students?

### *Orientations*

- How do you discuss the concept of gender with your students?
- Have you ever discussed non-heterosexual orientations with your students?
- What kinds of institutional policies or barriers do you face to discussing these things?
- Would/do you feel comfortable discussing non-heterosexual orientations? Do you face challenges here?
- Have you ever wondered if some of your students may not be heterosexual? Why/Why not?
- Have you ever heard terms such as 'fag' or 'gay' being used by your students?
- How do you address bullying in the classroom?
- Have you discussed these types of things/challenges with your colleagues? How do they address them?
- What is meant by heterosexism?
- What is meant by homophobia?



## APPENDIX C

Wilfrid Laurier University

**Informed Consent Statement**

Researcher: Anna Spengen, MA Student  
spen9060@mylaurier.ca  
Department of Sociology, Wilfrid Laurier University

Supervisor: Dr. Jeffrey Aguinaldo, PhD  
jaguinaldo@wlu.ca  
Department of Sociology, Wilfrid Laurier University

You are invited to participate in my research study on teacher's talk about sexuality. More specifically, the purpose of this study is to uncover the different kinds of talk that teachers employ to discuss this subject matter during informal, everyday classroom discussions in their primary school classrooms.

**Information:**

Participants are invited to participate in a one-on-one interview, the total duration of which will be approximately 1 to 1.5 hours in length. During this time, you will be interviewed about the discussions you have with your students about sexuality. The interviews will be conducted in a place of your preference (i.e. your home, a coffee shop, etc.). All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed.

**Confidentiality:**

Several steps will be taken to protect your anonymity and identity. While the interviews will be voice-recorded, the tapes will be stored in secure computer files and will be destroyed upon completion of the study, in September 2014. The transcribed interviews will NOT contain any mention of your name, and identifying information from the interview will be removed. At the end of this document, you will be given the option to allow for the use of direct quotations from your interview in the research report. If any quotations are used in the research report, you will be given a pseudonym to protect your identity. Further, anyone mentioned by you in the interview will also be given a pseudonym. The transcribed interview data will be kept in a secure room at Wilfrid Laurier University, to which only the main researcher and supervisor will have access. All transcribed interview data will be destroyed after a two year period.

**Participation:**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study, every attempt will be made to remove your data from the study and to have it destroyed. You have the right to omit responses to any of the interview questions you choose.

**Feedback and Publication:**

The results of this research will be used to complete the final component of the MA program requirements, which is a major research paper focusing on a topic of choice. Research findings may be further disseminated in the form of journal articles or conference presentations. If you would like to obtain a copy of the final product, arrangements can be made in September, 2014.

**Contact:**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Anna Spengen, at [spen9060@mylaurier.ca](mailto:spen9060@mylaurier.ca), or Dr. Jeffrey Aguinaldo, at [jaguinaldo@wlu.ca](mailto:jaguinaldo@wlu.ca). This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, 519-884-1970, extension 4994 (9) or at [rbasso@wlu.ca](mailto:rbasso@wlu.ca).

**Consent:**

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Consent for the use of quotations:**

I agree to allow for the use of quotations in the final research report.

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_