Spring 2023

The Centrality of Community in Education about Gender-Based Violence

Catherine Vanner
University of Windsor, catherine.vanner@uwindsor.ca

Recommended Citation

The Centrality of Community in Education about Gender-Based Violence

The Centrality of Community in Education about Gender-Based Violence

Catherine Vanner, University of Windsor

Abstract: The *Time to Teach about Gender-Based Violence in Canada* project asked teacher and student participants how Canadian educators could improve young people's critical consciousness in relation to gender-based violence. Data collection involved individual interviews with 14 teachers, participatory workshops with three groups of students, and a virtual workshop in which teacher participants validated and expanded upon initial analysis of their interview data and responded to cellphilms produced in the student workshops. Drawing upon feminist and engaged pedagogy and situating gender-based violence as a form of difficult knowledge, analysis identifies community as a central concept for effective teaching about gender-based violence from both teacher and student perspectives. The concept of community is broken down into creating community, teaching in community, and connecting with communities. Teacher participants indicated that their capacity to create and sustain transformative learning communities would be enhanced by further support from the educational communities that they are members of.

In Fall 2021, Canadian media filled again with reports of gender-based violence (GBV) and misogyny on university campuses (Bieman 2021; Mazur 2021), leading to calls for more training on prevention of GBV and awareness of the underlying cultures that contribute to it. But the role of schools has often been omitted from conversations about GBV prevention. GBV is defined as any form of violence directed toward someone because of their gender, gender identity, gender expression or perceived gender (Women and Gender Equality Canada 2022). As the student leaders of #HighSchoolToo, a national student-led network that works to end sexual violence in secondary schools, advocate, "Sexual violence does not start in university or college. High school students are targeted at alarming rates" (High School Too, n.d.). They note that few provinces have mandatory sexual violence and consent education for all grade levels. GBV is most often addressed in schools within sex education which, in many provinces, finishes in Grade 9, and typically focuses on individual responsibility without addressing social and systemic causes of GBV (Vanner 2021).

This research examines the roles of secondary and middle schools in helping young people to understand and subvert the root causes of GBV, beginning with the question: "How can teachers enhance the critical consciousness of Canadian young people about gender-based violence?" This article describes qualitative data collection that brings together the perspectives of teachers who self-identified as teaching about GBV issues and students who spoke to their experiences learning about GBV in and out of classroom settings. Both groups provided recommendations for other teachers on how to improve teaching about GBV. Findings, discussed within feminist and engaged pedagogy (Shrewsbury 1997; hooks 1994), show that effective teaching about GBV occurs in relation to community: community between teachers and students that turns to external sources of knowledge and expertise and connects like-minded teachers together in supportive networks. Feminist and engaged pedagogy's emphasis on community is shown to be valuable

for teachers working with difficult knowledge, drawing on the narratives that emerged from teachers and students to show what education about GBV could look like in Canadian intermediate and secondary schools. Following data analysis, our team built resources that begin to offer some elements of the educational community participants asked for. We created a website, www.gbvteaching.com, with resources for teaching about a range of GBV subjects, and organized a professional development workshop with the support of local and provincial teachers' unions and school boards to provide training on teaching about GBV to in-service and pre-service teachers and developing a network of like-minded teachers. We share these findings in the hope that other educational stakeholders will similarly respond to the calls of the teacher and student participants for stronger educational communities that work collaboratively to transform GBV.

Conceptual Framework

Feminist pedagogy is defined as "a movement against hegemonic educational practices that tacitly accept or more forcefully reproduce an oppressively gendered, classed, racialized, and androcentric social order" (Crabtree et al. 2009, 1). Caroline Shrewsbury (1997) identifies community as one of three interdependent characteristics of feminist pedagogy, along with leadership and empowerment, writing that feminist pedagogy re-imagines the classroom "as a community of learners where there is both autonomy of self and mutuality with others" (10). To achieve this, the teacher must intentionally develop a shared sense of purpose and teach students the skills needed to accomplish those goals in partnership with their teacher (Shrewsbury 1997). Feminist pedagogy is not limited to a given subject matter but describes a process of teaching and learning that is defined by relationships and informed by power (Ibid.).

Research describing feminist pedagogy in practice identifies strong student-teacher relationships based on mutual respect as paramount; these relationships can be enhanced by teachers' personal vulnerability to facilitate authentic connections with their students (Elwell and Buchanan 2021). Kyoko Kishimoto and Mumbi Mwangi (2009), reflecting on their use of feminist pedagogy in higher education, note that women of colour are often pressured to disclose their personal stories to justify the ways that their classes often challenge students' white privilege, belief in meritocracy, and general comfort zones. They describe vulnerability as a tool that can be liberating when used to enable social change, writing that being vulnerable enables them to "reveal the hegemonic systems within academia, destroy the cameras that surveil us, dismantle the status quo, and build a more egalitarian and much more democratic system" (95). bell hooks' engaged pedagogy (1994) builds on feminist pedagogy, interwoven with anticolonial and critical pedagogy and emphasizing the connections between experiences of gender, race, and class both in curricular content and teaching and learning processes. Engaged pedagogy rejects dichotomies between academic knowledge and lived experiences, instead arguing that theory emerges from lived experience and, consequently, experiences of both students and teachers should have a valued place in the classroom as a means of making sense of academic subject matter.

Because feminist pedagogy is, at its core, about transforming social inequalities both within and outside of the classroom, the classroom is inherently unsettling (Kishimoto and Mwangi 2009), and at times requires leaning into conflict, challenges, and tension (McCusker 2017). Feminist pedagogy politicizes the teaching process, using an embodied approach to analyze the ways that power circulates within the classroom, among students, teachers, and within the learning process (Almanssori 2020). Kathy Bickmore and Christina Parker (2014) advocate for "conflict dialogue" as a means by which students and teachers engage in conversation about differing and opposing perspectives on social and/or personal issues, possibly involving discussion seminars, talking circles, and decision-making goals, as used in peacebuilding

processes such as deliberation, conflict resolution, and restorative justice. Bickmore (2014) found that Canadian teachers who enable students to work through conflict do so through intentional pedagogical activities and expectations that "guide and support constructive and inclusive participation, [with] explicit attention to building nonviolent norms and respectful relationships" (578), prompting all students to share their views and have them constructively acknowledged by the teacher and other students. Teachers who did not intentionally facilitate conflict dialogue inadvertently reproduced social inequalities, for example by centering the teacher's voice and/or the most outspoken (also often the most privileged) students in the class. hooks' (2010) work on engaged pedagogy also calls for conversation-based learning that acknowledges each student's voice as valuable and encourages teachers to teach students how to actively listen to each other and respectfully contribute.

Scholars and educators have troubled the notion of the "safe" classroom or learning environment, questioning whether it is possible—particularly for students from traditionally marginalized groups—or desirable, as it is often interpreted in practice as "comfortable" (Barrett 2010; Zembylas 2015). There are many approaches that encourage students and teachers to venture outside of what is comfortable for them without veering into what feels unsafe. Megan Boler's (1999) "pedagogy of discomfort" encourages students to critically analyze their own ideological values and beliefs, and unpack the ways they have learned to see the world. Michalinos Zembylas (2015) observes that the pedagogy of discomfort approach "embraces discomfort as a point of departure for individual and social transformation" (166). Betty Barrett (2010) recommends educators shift focus from safety, which focuses on invisible and individual psychological constructs, to civility, which emphasizes visible behavioural constructs while prioritizing the common good. hooks (2003) also calls for shifting from prioritizing safety to community; this paper takes up hooks' community focus most directly and analyzes the ways it is enacted or called for, according to teacher and student participants, in education about GBV.

Teaching about gender-based violence is a form of difficult knowledge (Cahill and Dadvand 2021a; Lange and Young 2019). Difficult knowledge is a concept introduced by Deborah Britzman (1998) to refer to forms of social trauma that are so devastating that the process of learning about them contains "a kernel of trauma in the very capacity to know" (Pitt and Britzman 2003, 756). Difficult knowledge is "the curriculum that enacts the breakdown of meaning and is faced with the question of reparation or mourning the loss of sociality, friendship, love, and resolution" (Britzman 2013, 100). Elizabeth Lange and Susan Young (2019) refer to difficult knowledge as "the 'hard stuff' to grapple with, both the pain and suffering of the minority group, but also the world views, defensive rationalizations, and shame of the dominant group" (320). The process of teaching about difficult knowledge is likely to trigger student expressions of resistance and/or feelings of guilt or resentment (Cahill and Dadvand 2021a; McQueeney 2016; Lange and Young 2019; Zembylas 2019). Zembylas (2019) advocates for the pedagogical objective of shared responsibility in which students "that all people are implicated in systems of oppression and injustice yet . . . delineate different degrees of culpability" (412). This shift moves students away from the idea that they are somehow at fault for other people's violent acts yet asks them to share responsibility for building a society in which the social trauma they are learning about is less likely to occur. Research on teaching about GBV in higher education and with adolescents has shown that action-oriented projects can create paths by which they feel that they can be part of "making a difference" to address the issue (Gardner 2009; Martin and Beese 2017; McQueeney 2016). These action orientations align with feminist pedagogy, which encourages students to bridge the divide between the classroom and the community in which the school and students reside, engaging strategies such as service-learning, action research, and community-based learning that blend the individual student's educational experience with movement to change collective social reality (Crabtree et al. 2009).

Methods

This project used qualitative and participatory visual methods to bring student and teacher voices in dialogue with each other, culminating in Intergenerational Reflections (Vanner, forthcoming) that prompt teachers to make recommendations building on students' perspectives as well as their own. Data collection included individual interviews with 14 (11f/3m) intermediate and secondary school teachers from five provinces, member check interviews with four of the teachers interviewed, and three participatory art-based workshops with intermediate and secondary school students in three provinces. The student workshops involved 11 Indigenous girls ages 11–17 connected to the Young Indigenous Women's Utopia (YIWU) in Treaty 6 Territory, Traditional Homeland of the Métis People (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan), three white girls and one South Asian girl ages 15–17 who were members of the Rangers 12th Unit (a Girl Guides program in Ottawa, Ontario), and seven African Nova Scotian boys ages 15–17 who were part of a Guys Group in Halifax, Nova Scotia.[1] It culminated in a virtual workshop with 12 teachers (10f/2m; all but one of whom had been interviewed), in which they analyzed data from their interviews and the student workshops, validating emergent themes and producing teacher-oriented recommendations that build on the teachers' and students' narratives. The teacher participants mostly identified as white of European ancestry. Three teachers identified as Métis, Muslim, and of mixed North African and European ancestry; all teacher participants identified as cisgender and heterosexual.

Visual, art-based, and task-based methods are useful for engaging participants in creative, fun, and self-reflexive ways, including when addressing GBV with adolescents (Renold 2018). Participatory and visual approaches to data collection, including cellphilms (MacEntee et al. 2016) and carousel papers (Vanner et al. 2021) were used in the student workshops and the virtual teacher workshop. The student workshops began with introductions to GBV concepts, asked students how they have learned about GBV, and what they thought teachers should know when teaching about GBV. Students responded to the prompts first using carousel papers, where they moved around the room writing their response and building on what each other had written. The researcher(s)[2] and participants reviewed the carousel papers together in a recorded focus group, before the participants developed cellphilms (short videos recorded using tablets) on the themes they felt best responded to the prompt "what do you think your teachers should know when teaching about GBV?"

Data was initially analyzed with participants in the workshops, constituting a form of participatory data analysis (Foster-Fishman et al. 2010), and was subsequently more formally analyzed by a research team using Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2014), conducting initial and focused coding and organizing the data in Nvivo. Initial and focused coding of the teacher interviews and the student workshop data was conducted collaboratively by the principal investigator and two graduate student research assistants and presented to the teachers during the virtual workshop in April–May 2020; participants responded to and expanded upon the themes our team had identified, in turn creating new data. During the virtual workshop, the participants also watched the student participants' cellphilms and responded to them in an anonymous individual survey and an asynchronous group discussion. Finally, they worked with our team to craft recommendations for more widespread and effective teaching about GBV. The following reflects on themes that were relevant across the three data sets (teacher interviews, student workshops, teacher workshop) to create an over-arching theory embedded in the perspectives of the student and teacher participants. Quotes presented here were deemed to be representative of sentiments expressed across a majority of participants, with both student and teacher participant voices speaking to each theme.

Results

Several teachers recognized the impossibility of a safe space when teaching about GBV, involving risks such as public disclosures of abuse, expressions of toxic masculinity and rape culture that could emerge through group discussions, and retraumatization of students victimized by GBV, who may be unknown to the teacher. These were risks that were troubling to teachers but that they felt were necessary to manage in order to teach about the phenomenon of GBV, or a specific GBV issue that they wanted their students to understand. Moving past the goal of "safe" learning environments, teachers focused on concepts such as relationships, vulnerability, dialogue, empowerment, support, and diversification. Seven themes from the teacher interviews were presented to teacher participants in the virtual workshop and adapted first through the teacher workshop and then through the consolidation of the three datasets. One theme, teaching with power and privilege, was identified by the teacher participants and the research team to be so pivotal that it became the focus of a separate paper (Vanner, Holloway and Almanssori 2022). Community was identified as an over-arching concept connecting the remaining themes. The following discusses the results in relation to processes of *creating* community, teaching *in* community, and teaching *with* community.

Creating Community

Many teachers emphasized the need for multiple strategies to build relationships with students in order to gain their trust and establish expectations for respectful behaviour, including continuous modeling of that behaviour, before they could begin to address GBV issues. Sara said, "I think relationships are the most important thing we can do from day one to encourage a classroom environment built on trust." Building relationships began with getting to know their students in order to anticipate how the students might respond to the difficult knowledge presented, which would likely vary by class and by student. Students also acknowledged that the effort of getting to know them on a personal level made a difference in how students then received lessons about difficult knowledge. For example, members of the Guys Group reflected in a focus group:

> ***Participant 1***: If you have that like mother figure teacher teaching stuff like this, you know that it's coming from like deep down place and she actually cares for the students because she's showing her students that she cares for them . . . I know when certain teachers speak, I listen better than others.
> ***Researcher***: And what do the teachers you listen to do? Like you talked about they show that they care?
> ***Participant 1***: Oh, like they're engaging.
> ***Participant 2***: Yeah, and they ask you how you're doing in general at home, at school, how's your grades going, they don't just care about this class, they care about how you're doing until later.
> ***Participant 3***: Yeah, they wanna know about your life. They wanna know about your sports, about stuff like that. It's just good to have, like, it's pretty much like a friendship, just someone to talk to.

Bridget further described how, over time, her understanding of her students enabled her to make choices about the material she drew upon, recognizing the maturity level of her students and the dynamics in her

different classes; for example, she chose a cartoon that dealt with consent and included an image of a cartoon character with a strap on sex toy but only used it in one of her classes. She reflected,

> I knew in one class it would be absolutely no problem . . . they would be able to be mature about it and see this as just like introducing something different or new to any relationship. And then I had two other classes where I know that, if I showed this slide of this person who had a strap on, I would just lose them.

Because GBV topics relate to sex, there is a risk that they can be trivialized by students, particularly given that—as some teachers identified—some have been desensitized to violence. Thus, as Bridget indicated, the approach that is taken by teachers should respond to the maturity level demonstrated in the classroom to that point.

Another key component of building relationships that teachers described was enabling the students to get to know the teacher personally as critical for a sense of community-building. Marie explained that part of how she connects to her students is by showing how she connects to the community outside of the school (in this case, an Indigenous community shared by many of her students and their families). Kelly also describes her involvement in the community to her students by using a questionnaire that plots the class's political perspectives, including her own, and referencing her experiences running for office. Beyond getting to know each other, Heather stated that, in her experience, sharing her personal story set the stage for students to subsequently open up to her: "the trust, that I'm going to tell you stories, and if you feel, maybe that will make you feel more comfortable about your situation. And then they stick around after class and want to talk." This helps build teachers' awareness regarding whether their students may have directly experienced GBV. Disclosures of student abuse are often feared by teachers, even preventing teachers from addressing GBV all together (Cahill and Dadvand, 2021b), and can be damaging to the student when done in front of the class. Having a student disclose experiences of abuse, even privately to a teacher, triggers a legal reporting requirement for the teacher that they may fear. But, as Heather suggests, a private conversation also provides the teacher the opportunity to support the student, potentially in ways that can be critical for healing but may not have been received from another adult. Sensitivity to prior experiences of GBV was also identified as an important consideration by students, notably by YIWU participants, who recommended: "Knowing where people are at on this topic, if they're sensitive to it maybe don't talk about it with them or change the way you word it. Also, to warn them about it. Don't force them to learn about it." Prior trusting relationships are key for understanding the reasons a student may be disengaging from a subject and avoiding or minimizing retraumatization of that student.

After reviewing the emerging analysis regarding relationships in the virtual workshop, Marnie identified a gap in our research team's initial analysis: "A part that is missing is the relationship building *between* students. Students may very well have a great relationship with their teacher but may still feel unsafe, or not able to reach their full potential in class." The importance of strong student-student relationships was also raised by the Guys Group participants, who reflected that their enriching experiences learning about positive vs. toxic masculinity developed in part because of their sustained connection in the same extracurricular group over several years. While this level of intimacy may not be possible in a shorter timeframe, Marnie recommended community circles at the beginning and end of a week as effective: "it has really changed the dynamic of my class and we have been able to talk about some mature topics (one of them being violence) during this time." Building trust and the capacity of students to share authentically and vulnerably is important for addressing multiple forms of difficult knowledge; a distinction with GBV is the invisibility of traumatizing experiences. Community circles can provide valuable opportunities for each student to speak and share their perspective, providing an opportunity to build relationships and trust

before broaching difficult knowledge. Before conducting them or other large group discussions however, teachers emphasized the need to encourage students to share personal experiences of violence only privately with the teacher. Some teachers spoke to the practice of reminding students that there may be other students in the room that have experienced GBV, so they should communicate their views with empathy in mind.

Teaching in Community

Once a sense of community has been established, teachers discussed strategies they used to maintain and build a sense of community through respectful dialogue. Part of this occurred through modelling, by consistently demonstrating active listening, respectful questioning, and genuinely considering student suggestions. Erin wrote, "I love the idea that there is a reputation that comes into play—it's not just about guiding conversation in a safe way while a particular conversation is happening, but there needs to be trust based on how I as a teacher have facilitated every discussion." Teachers also reflected on the need to actively teach not only the subject matter but *how* students should engage with it. As Stu said, "In the sense of coaching your students on, you're addressing the issue, not necessarily attacking the person." Teachers "coach" their students in a variety of ways. Marnie teaches her Grade 8 students what respectful listening means and how this should be received, asking them: "what are some things you can share [with] someone who has shared something vulnerable?" Sara takes another approach by encouraging her students to develop opinions that are bolstered by facts: "we start off really early in the semester looking at opinion versus fact, and how do we base our understanding of the world based on the facts that exist. How do we ensure that what we're saying is not strictly opinion?" Most teachers had a range of strategies they drew upon to de-escalate conversations that had gotten heated. These included inviting students to turn to prepared activities or journaling when conversation got intense, as well as reminding the students that the GBV topics being discussed affect real people, possibly including people in the room. When discussion became excessively heated over a conversation about rape culture in her Grade 9 English class, Erin asked students to take a break, journal their reflections, and return to a group discussion while keeping in mind that, "this is a real-world thing. Once we kind of pulled it out of the book, we were able to have a little bit more of a respectful conversation. The heatedness, the agitation, and the belligerence kind of went away at that point." Students also asked for teachers to enable them to manage their own ability to stay in the class and to stay engaged in the conversation, or to check out or leave the room if that is what they identified was best for them. YIWU participants advised, "Teachers should give the kids space if the topic is too heavy, let them leave class, have a school counselor stand by for support . . . Warn the students ahead of time so they have time to process it and can let the teacher know privately that they don't want to participate." Since a prior experience of GBV can be emotionally intense and quickly retraumatizing, students requested not just the opportunity to leave but to be provided with a supportive space to spend the class instead. Many of the Indigenous students in YIWU expressed the desire for this space to have appropriate cultural supports, such as smudging, made available.

The process of self-regulation relates to respecting and empowering students. Marie spoke to the importance of flexibility, to be able to move away from a lesson plan to have another conversation that their students want to have with them: "Part of my teaching practice is that if the kids are wanting to talk about something, I can stop what I'm teaching and have that conversation with them out of respect for them as young people." Rangers participants also asked to be able to feed into the planning process, recommending teachers have "class discussions about what the students want to learn" as well as creative student-centered projects that enabled them to share their opinions: "Mixed media to keep students captivated [and] group

projects to share perspectives." These ideas were picked up on by the teachers in the workshop, who identified implications for their pedagogy after watching cellphilms developed by the students. Sam wrote that, moving forward, she wanted to focus on:

> Learning to listen to my students—really listen and keep on listening. Allowing for students to decide the direction (somewhat) of their education (there are limits). Student involvement and ultimately where they want to go (outcome) is essential to their development as young adults not only in the realm of education but as active citizens.

Stu recognized that really listening to his students and giving them agency required abandoning the all-powerful teacher authority figure role:

> That option to leave is something that defies that typical authoritative teacher I grew up with [who] were inherently skeptical-by-default of student motives for leaving the classroom—as opposed to being inherently empathetic-by-default. Going forward remembering that it is okay to default to assume that the students aren't leaving for "unacceptable" reasons.

While these student-centered models are not valuable only for GBV, they were perceived by students and teachers to be particularly relevant in this context because they empowered students to define and enact their own boundaries (also important for GBV prevention) and build leadership and activism opportunities.

Teachers described having observed in the past few years that some GBV concepts, such as rape culture and toxic masculinity, have become a focus of culture wars between far right and left-wing groups on social media. Consequently, students bring more pre-conceived notions of these topics into class, shutting down or ramping up as soon as they are mentioned. Heather described how two male students in her class audibly sighed and slumped down in their chairs as soon as she used the words "toxic masculinity," startling her because these were otherwise thoughtful and engaged students. She later reflected,

> The amount of misinformation that is being spread via social media is making addressing these issues much more difficult and time consuming. No longer can I teach about privilege to a group of students who are relatively blank slates when it comes to this. I now have to try and unteach them first.

This prior exposure can create a hostile environment that, in several teachers' experiences, emboldened male students to vehemently attack the concept of toxic masculinity (in Heather's experience) and rape culture (in Erin's). While this made it challenging for the teachers to get through their lesson plans, it also made them worried about the potentially retraumatizing impact on other students in the class who may have been affected by GBV.

Across all the student workshops, participants called for tangible strategies for preventing GBV. The YIWU and Rangers participants described experiencing different forms of violence in schools, including GBV, and frustration that teachers were not always responsive when told about students' experiences. The YIWU participants called for teaching about GBV issues earlier "so they're aware of it sooner and that they could point it out and deal with it properly." The Guys Group participants did not report experiencing GBV but were interested to know how they could engage in its prevention and response, stating, "I think we should start learning about ways to take action and prevent things like this from happening" as well as asking for information on "how to handle it and how to help others going through any situation they're in related to GBV." They all resisted expectations that students would be passive

recipients of education, calling for ways to influence the learning process and enact tangible strategies for change.

Teaching Within Community

Both teachers and students recognized that some things are beyond the teacher's capacity; to accomplish their goals and to respond to the recommendations from students, teachers had to move outside of the classroom to get support from broader communities. In some instances, these were activist communities working in GBV prevention and response. The YIWU participants in particular, many of whom had engaged with GBV activism through the group, strongly felt that teaching about GBV should not be limited to the classroom but should be connected to broader activism efforts within the school and community. One participant stated, "I think they shouldn't just be teaching it. I think there could be support groups and workshops on it." Other participants built on this idea, suggesting "Workshops from around the city!! Multiple times a year" and another suggested connecting to "other groups like girls' groups around the world teaching more about GBV." All three student groups spoke to the need to bring in members of the community to provide first-hand perspectives relating to GBV. The Rangers participants reflected, "The first-hand perspectives would put a face to the statistics . . . might allow for understanding the scope of the issue." This recommendation came most ardently, however, from the Guys Group participants who, as self-identified boys, may struggle more to grasp the severity of GBV. They recommended: "We should have people who have gone through these experiences. We should ask more questions and be ready to have these hard conversations . . . and also let people know how they can get help on these subjects." For the YIWU participants, bringing in community members to support teaching was particularly important for non-Indigenous teachers seeking to teach about GBV issues affecting Indigenous communities, such as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit people. Many of the YIWU participants' recommendations for teaching about GBV included attending to the spiritual needs of Indigenous students, for example through smudging ceremonies. But they cautioned that, "if a non-Indigenous teacher wants to do spiritual things (prayers, songs, smudge) they should have someone Indigenous there to help them or to support them." This requires a teacher's advanced planning to build and sustain relationships with Indigenous support systems in order to make them accessible to students.

Teachers echoed the importance of recognizing the limitations of their knowledge and bringing in guest speakers to provide first-hand experience and diverse perspectives. Both teachers and students identified the lack of diversity in the teaching profession and the curriculum as problematic. A YIWU participant stated, "hopefully now we will [have] some Indigenous teachers . . . Hopefully we get some more cultural teachers. I think we only have two teachers in our school who aren't Caucasian . . . hopefully we can get more races there." Sara (a teacher who is white) shared a similar reflection:

> Our teaching staff is a very homogenous group . . . there's a lot of white and . . . Christian teachers and a lot of teachers who are cis-gendered and don't identify outside of the heteronormative experience that they have . . . we refer to it in Challenge and Change [a Grade 12 Social Sciences course], we say you can't be what you can't see.

Both students and teachers also talked about how teachers could connect with community in multiple ways to deepen their knowledge and understanding about a perspective or experience outside of their own, both by engaging individually and with their students in community events outside of the class and through practices such as following diverse narratives on social media as a way to recognize and challenge their

biases and learn more about other groups' perspectives. Teachers and students were aware of the need to be learning within a diverse community, and to be actively creating a diverse community when it did not already exist in their class.

Another form of community that teachers called for was support from educational institutions. Many spoke to the importance of supportive administrators or department heads to enable them to take risks while still meeting the objectives of the curriculum. As Sara said, "I'm really fortunate that the past two administrators at the school I teach at are worried less about the amount of curriculum covered and more about the depth of teaching. They have said several times that it is not about covering the curriculum but about having students deeply connecting to the material. This was a big shift from the first administrator I had in my teaching career." By contrast, one teacher anonymously described hierarchical relationships between teachers and administrators as barriers to this work, pointing to the need to, "open the line of communication between teachers and with administration. Often, there stands a disconnect within the hierarchy (already a problem in and of itself)." Several teachers identified mentors as helping them to develop strategies and overcome their fears in talking about difficult knowledge.

Others argued that this support needed to be available earlier through teacher education. Ann identified this as a gap in the research team's initial analysis: "What is overlooked is the fact that there is no acknowledgement that this needs to be talked about in schools, no training in teachers' college." Another teacher anonymously expressed frustration with the lack of leadership from a variety of stakeholders within education, noting that progress on GBV prevention education has been led by teachers: "this was not even a conversation I had in teachers' college, has only been partially addressed [by the teachers' union], definitely has not come up with [the Ontario College for Teachers]; any concrete work that my school has done has been on the backs of teachers like me who did it on the sides of our desks." Thus, while teachers appreciated support provided from within their school, they point to the need for broader support from the education system outside of the school, including through school boards, teachers' unions, teacher training colleges, and teacher certification bodies.

Discussion

Many of the themes and practices identified by participants are relevant for teaching about various forms of difficult knowledge, but some are specific to teaching about GBV. While some groups are disproportionately affected by GBV, students from all demographics can be affected by GBV. Experiences of GBV are invisible and rarely identified by the student to the teacher. Thus, unlike discussions of racism, antisemitism, poverty, or ableism where it is sometimes (although not always) possible to identify students in your class who are more likely to have been directly affected by the issue, with GBV it is important to assume that some students have been directly affected, but usually without knowing who. Some of the GBV topics that teachers address are historical, such as the 1989 École Polytechnique massacre in Montreal, and some were in relation to violence directed toward a group of people, such as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit people. But many of the GBV topics addressed by the teacher participants, such as rape culture, toxic masculinity, domestic violence, and sexual assault, span time periods and populations and may be currently affecting students in the class. It is a form of difficult knowledge whereby some students are awakening to the prevalence of social trauma that permeates their community but has not affected them directly or that they may have even perpetrated, while others in the same class are learning about something that has already affected them, their friends, or their family members. Participants identified relationship-building as necessary to understand how many students fall into these categories, and how they are likely to respond to this information. They indicated that knowing

students as whole people enabled them to assess the emotional awareness and intelligence of the class, answering the question of "who are we teaching?" (hooks 2010, 19) and adapting accordingly. Not only did this enable teachers to plan their lessons according to the collective maturity of their class but determined whether the students will actually listen to them and engage in the lesson, as observed by student participants.

The concept of conflict dialogue (Bickmore 2014; Bickmore and Parker 2014) becomes central to addressing difficult knowledge that students have various embodied experiences with, perhaps in relation to each other in the classroom. Teacher participants were united in the importance of "coaching" their students on how to engage in difficult conversations, aligning with feminist and engaged pedagogy's emphasis on teaching students how to be respectful members of a learning community (Shrewsbury 1997; hooks 2010). The participants' approaches to doing so varied, from an individual reflective approach that encouraged students to explore the connections between their opinions and supporting evidence to a relational approach that asked students to reflect on how to honour another student for sharing something vulnerable. Erin reflected that, in her experience, refocusing the conversation on the fact that these are not only academic subjects but lived experiences that real people have—even people in the classroom—is helpful for moving conversations in a respectful direction. As concepts inherent to discussions of GBV, such as toxic masculinity, privilege, consent, and rape culture have become hot topics politically and culturally, many students dive into heated discussions without understanding the "real" impact of GBV experiences outside of their relationship to a woke agenda. The move to recognize GBV as lived experiences with traumatizing effects directs students not only toward civility (Barrett 2010) but toward community (hooks 2003), by bringing attention to the embodied experiences of the different students in the room. Refocusing students' attention on lived experiences of violence encourages reflection on their relationships and responsibilities toward each other. hooks (1994; 2003) calls for celebrating difference and confronting tensions through conversation and dialogue that enable students to get to know each other better, reflecting her concept of theory as emergent *from* lived experience. The teachers recommend using reflective exercises and activities that pause an escalating conversation and refocus on respectful relationships, such as community circles where each student speaks in turn or journaling exercises where students can communicate directly to their teachers, both forms of communication that provide all students equal space and opportunity for participation (Bickmore 2014).

All three student groups expressed a strong call for an action orientation in education about GBV. For both groups of girls, this was about learning to protect themselves, while for the Guys Group it was about protecting others. The YIWU participants also called for engaging in broader community activism. All these action orientations align closely with feminist pedagogy, as demonstrated by action orientations within courses that use feminist pedagogy to teach about GBV in higher education (Gardner 2009; Martin and Beese 2017; McQueeney 2016). Considering GBV as difficult knowledge, the action orientation provides a means by which students can process the difficult knowledge that, for some of them, has given language and theory to their lived experiences, and for others presents brand new information about the injustice of the world that may shake their prior belief system. In relation to teaching about difficult knowledge more broadly, Zembylas (2015) encourages teachers to focus on shared vulnerabilities and complicities, rather than casting groups into various roles as "oppressed" and "oppressors." The pedagogical objective of shared responsibility (Zembylas 2019) is advanced through the action orientation the student participants called for. The participants rejected a passive role in absorbing this information, seeking something that they can *do* as a means of regaining control when presented with injustice. This acknowledges that by doing nothing they reinforce a violent and unequal status quo, instead asking their teachers to position them as agents of change and give them skills and strategies to work toward that. Still, Zembylas (2015) emphasizes that many different emotional manifestations may result from learning about difficult knowledge; teachers must

prepare for affective tensions from a wide range of student emotion that may include boredom, apathy, resentment, hatred, anger, nostalgia, sorrow, loss, shame, guilt, and humiliation. The desire for empowerment and resistance cannot be taken for granted and must be cultivated by leaning into students' interests.

The concept of shared responsibility in relation to the broader teaching and learning process is also prevalent within hooks' (1994) framework of engaged pedagogy, in which she calls for students to have opportunities to influence, inform, and empower their educators. As hooks encourages teachers to teach their students to listen and really hear each other, several teacher participants identified the need for teachers to listen to their students more deeply. hooks (1994) also asks teachers to consider *which* students are able to speak in their classroom and whose voices are centered. Both the students and teachers in this study extended this question to examine the teacher's location, asking *who* is leading their classroom community and who is absent, needing to intentionally bring in diverse perspectives to enable what hooks refers to as "border-crossing dialogue" (129). Some teachers expressed frustration at their inability to effectively respond to issues that the student participants raised, many of which are outside a teacher's control and require a systemic approach. This points to the importance of community in relation to networks that prepare and support them to teach about GBV and other forms of difficult knowledge. Salsabel Almanssori (2022) demonstrates that many Canadian teachers experienced inadequate sexual violence prevention education in their K–12 experiences yet remain unprepared to teach any differently in their own classrooms. She calls on teacher certification programs to more explicitly address GBV prevention, as did several of the teacher participants in this study. This aspect of community reflects research showing that teachers and students' exercise of agency is shaped by the support they receive from an educational community including their administration, colleagues, school board, teachers' union, and teacher education program (Priestley 2012).

Conclusion

Two participants from the Guys Group created a cellphilm entitled "Not Alone" that suggested that emotional support within a trusting relationship was critical for students affected by GBV. This article shows how connection is important not only for survivors of GBV but also for teachers and students who are teaching and learning about it. Community is taken up in these student and teacher narratives on teaching about GBV in three ways: through the creation of community within the classroom, teaching practices that sustain that community as students encounter difficult knowledge, and through the intentional connection of their classroom to communities outside of it. While there are some aspects of these findings that are broadly applicable to teaching about many types of difficult knowledge, there is a limited literature specifically speaking to experiences of teaching about GBV in a K–12 curricular context, particularly outside of sex education. The testimonies of students show the need for more teaching about GBV with a focus on building and sustaining community, while the experiences of teachers demonstrate the feasibility of doing so while teaching to the provincial curriculum expectations in Canada.

The aspect of community that the teachers identify as most constraining their ability to respond to the recommendations of students is the lack of institutional support they receive from the education system, during and prior to embarking on their teaching careers. This project's data collection occurred in 2019 and early 2020, concluding at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when the researchers and participants were unaware of the magnitude of effect the pandemic would have on classrooms. Across Canada, the pandemic has created increased stress and anxiety for teachers (Sokal et al. 2020) and students (Cost et al. 2022), with the most significant harm done to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, racialized children

and youth, newcomers to Canada, and students with disabilities (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2021). These challenges point to an even stronger need for trusting relationships within the classroom (Vaillancourt et al. 2021). From a systemic perspective, there have been some movements to prioritize GBV education. For example, the Ontario College of Teachers introduced an online sexual abuse prevention program that must be completed by all certified teachers. The teachers in this study were all grateful for their principals' support, which they considered essential for enabling them to teach about GBV effectively. That said, they still identified gaps in their educational communities as barriers to better teaching about GBV, calling for GBV prevention education to be more explicitly addressed during professional development and teacher education programs. In the absence of educational communities that are supportive of GBV teaching, teachers are creating their own. Their work could be amplified by stronger support within the education system, including from teacher colleges, teachers' unions, school boards, and ministries of education.

Notes

1. The ethnicity and gender identity of the student participants and their group names and locations reflects descriptions provided by their community leaders to the author prior to the workshops.

2. The research activities in the YIWU student focus group were facilitated independently by the author; those with the Guys Group and the Rangers were led by the author and supported by a research assistant. All student workshops were organized with the input of their community group leaders.

References

Almanssori, Salsabel. 2020. "Feminist Pedagogy from Pre-Access to Post-Truth: A Literature Review." *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education* 11 (1): 15. https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/cjnse/article/view/69579

Almanssori, Salsasbel. 2022. "A Feminist Inquiry into Canadian Pre-Service Teacher Narratives on Sex Education and Sexual Violence Prevention." *Gender and Education* 34 (8): 1009–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2022.2101195

Barrett, Betty J. 2010. "Is 'Safety' Dangerous? A Critical Examination of the Classroom as Safe Space." *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 1 (1). https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2010.1.9

Bieman, Jennifer. 2021. "How Social Media 'Blew the Lid Off' Alleged Sexual Violence at Western." *The London Free Press*, October 6, 2021. https://lfpress.com/news/local-news/analysis-how-social-media-blew-the-lid-off-alleged-sexual-violence-at-western

Bickmore, Kathy. 2014. "Peacebuilding Dialogue Pedagogies in Canadian Classrooms." *Curriculum Inquiry* 44 (4): 553–82. https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12056

Bickmore, Kathy, and Christina Parker. 2014. "Constructive Conflict Talk in Classrooms: Divergent Approaches to Addressing Divergent Perspectives." *Theory & Research in Social Education* 42 (3): 291–335. https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2014.901199

Boler, Megan. 1999. *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*. Oxfordshire, UK: Taylor & Francis Group.

Britzman, Deborah. 1998. *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Britzman, Deborah. 2013. "Between Psychoanalysis and Pedagogy: Scenes of Rapprochement and Alienation." *Curriculum Inquiry* 43 (1), 95–117. https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12007

Cahill, Helen, and Babak Dadvand. 2021a. "Transformative Methods in Teacher Education about Gender-Based Violence." *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 30 (3): 311–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2021.1977978

Cahill, Helen, and Babak Dadvand. 2021b. "Triadic Labour in Teaching for the Prevention of Gender-Based Violence." *Gender and Education* 33 (2): 252–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2020.1722070

Charmaz, Kathy. 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Cost, Katherine Tombeau, Jennifer Crosbie, Evdokia Anagnostou, Catherine S. Birken, Alice Charach, Suneeta Monga, Elizabeth Kelley et al. 2022. "Mostly Worse, Occasionally Better: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Mental Health of Canadian Children and Adolescents." *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 31 (4): 671–84. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01744-3

Crabtree, Robbin C., David Alan Sapp, and Adela C. Licona, eds. 2009. *Feminist Pedagogy*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

Elwell, Alice, and Rachel Buchanan. 2021. "Feminist Pedagogies in a Time of Backlash." *Gender and Education* 33 (2): 156–70. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1680810

Foster-Fishman, Penny G., Kristen M. Law, Lauren F. Lichty, and Christina Aoun. 2010. "Youth ReACT for Social Change: A Method for Youth Participatory Action Research." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 46 (1): 67–83. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9316-y

Gallagher-Mackay, Kelly, Prachi Srivastava, Kathryn Underwood, Elizabeth Dhuey, Lance McCready, Karen Born, Antonina Maltsev, et al. 2021. *COVID-19 and Education Disruption in Ontario: Emerging Evidence on Impacts*. Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table. Last modified June 4, 2021. https://doi.org/10.47326/ocsat.2021.02.34.1.0

Gardner, Sandra. 2009. "Teaching About Domestic Violence: Strategies for Empowerment." In *Feminist Pedagogy: Looking Back to Move Forward,* edited by Robbin D. Crabtree, David A. Sapp, and Adela C. Licona, 150–58. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

High School Too. no date. "We Must End Sexual Violence in High School Too." Accessed June 9, 2022. https://www.highschooltoo.ca

hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.

hooks, bell. 2003. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.

hooks, bell. 2010. *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*. Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.

Kishimoto, Kyoko, and Mumbi Mwangi. 2009. "Critiquing the Rhetoric of 'Safety' in Feminist Pedagogy: Women of Color Offering an Account of Ourselves." *Feminist Teacher* 19 (2): 87–102. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40546084

Lange, Elizabeth, and Susan Young. 2019. "Gender-Based Violence as Difficult Knowledge: Pedagogies for Rebalancing the Masculine and the Feminine." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 38 (3): 301–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2019.1597932

MacEntee, Katie, Casey Burkholder, and Joshua Schwab-Cartas, eds. 2016. *What's a Cellphilm? Integrating Mobile Phone Technology into Participatory Visual Research and Activism*. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Martin, Jennnifer L., and Jane A. Beese. 2017. "Girls Talk Back Changing School Culture Through Feminist And Service-Learning Pedagogies." In *Feminist Pedagogy, Practice, and Activism: Improving Lives For Girls and Women,* edited by Jennifer L. Martin, Ashley E. Nickels, and Martina Sharp-Grier, 35–64. Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.

Mazur, Alexander. 2021. "Students Who Posted Misogynistic Signs Too Face Consequences Under Queen's Code of Conduct." *Global News*, October 18, 2021.   https://globalnews.ca/news/8274150/students-misogynistic-signs-consequences-queens/

McQueeney, Krista. 2016. "Teaching Domestic Violence in the New Millennium: Intersectionality as a Framework for Social Change." *Violence Against Women* 22 (12): 1463–75. Doi: 10.1177/1077801215626808

McCusker, Geraldine. 2017. "A Feminist Teacher's Account of her Attempts to Achieve the Goals of Feminist Pedagogy." *Gender and Education 29* (4): 445–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2017.1290220

Pitt, Alice, and Deborah Britzman. 2003. "Speculations on Qualities of Difficult Knowledge in Teaching and Learning: An Experiment in Psychoanalytic Research." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16 (6): 755–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390310001632135

Priestley, Mark, Richard Edwards, Andrea Priestley, and Kate Miller. 2012. "Teacher Agency in Curriculum Making: Agents of Change and Spaces for Manoeuvre." *Curriculum Inquiry* 42 (2): 191–214. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2012.00588.x

Renold, Emma. 2018. "'Feel What I Feel': Making Da(r)ta with Teen Girls for Creative Activisms on How Sexual Violence Matters." *Journal of Gender Studies* 27 (1): 37–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1296352

Revelles-Benavente, Beatriz, and Ana M. González Ramos, eds. 2017. *Teaching Gender: Feminist Pedagogy and Responsibility in Times of Political Crisis*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315204161

Shrewsbury, Caroline M. 1997. "What is Feminist Pedagogy?" *Women's Studies Quarterly* 25 (1/2). https://www.jstor.org/stable/40005427

Sokal, Laura, Lesley E. Trudel, and Jeff Babb. 2020. "Canadian Teachers' Attitudes Toward Change, Efficacy, and Burnout During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *International Journal of Educational Research Open* 1. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2020.100016

Vaillancourt, Tracy, Patricia McDougall, Jeannette Comeau, and Cindy Finn. 2021. "COVID-19 School Closures and Social Isolation in Children and Youth: Prioritizing Relationships in Education." *FACETS* 6: 1795–813. https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0080

Vanner, Catherine. 2021. "Education about Gender-Based Violence: Opportunities and Obstacles in the Ontario Secondary School Curriculum." *Gender and Education* 34 (2): 134–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1884193

Vanner, Catherine. "Teaching about Gender-Based Violence Network." University of Windsor and McGill University, 2022. https://www.gbvteaching.com/home

Vanner, Catherine. Forthcoming. "What Do You Want Your Teacher to Know? Intergenerational Participatory Analysis in Education Research." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education.*

Vanner, Catherine, Yasmeen Shahzadeh, Allison Holloway, Claudia Mitchell, and Jennifer Altenberg. 2021. "Round and Round the Carousel Papers: Facilitating a Visual Interactive Dialogue with Young People." In *Facilitating Community Research for Social Change,* edited by Casey Burkholder, *Funké Aladejebi and Joshua Schwab-Cartas,* 19 pages. Routledge.

Vanner, Catherine, Allison Holloway, and Salsabel Almanssori. 2022. "Teaching and Learning with Power and Privilege: Student and Teacher Identity in Education about Gender-Based Violence." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 116: 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103755

Women and Gender Equality Canada. 2022. "What is Gender-Based Violence?" Government of Canada. Last updated February 7, 2022. https://women-gender-equality.canada.ca/en/gender-based-violence-knowledge-centre/about-gender-based-violence.html#what

Zembylas, Michalinos. 2015. "'Pedagogy of Discomfort' and its Ethical Implications: The Tensions of Ethical Violence in Social Justice Education." *Ethics and Education* 10 (2): 163–74. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2015.1039274

Zembylas, Michalinos. 2019. "Encouraging Shared Responsibility without Invoking Collective Guilt: Exploring Pedagogical Responses to Portrayals of Suffering and Injustice in the Classroom." *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 27 (3): 403–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2018.1502206