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Education about Gender-Based Violence: Opportunities and Obstacles in the Ontario

Secondary School Curriculum

Author: Catherine Vanner

Title: Assistant Professor, Educational Foundations

Institutional Affiliation: Faculty of Education, University of Windsor

Current mailing address:

Room 3334, Leonard & Dorothy Neal Education Building
University of Windsor, 401 Sunset Avenue
Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4

Current email address: catherine.vanner@uwindsor.ca

Acknowledgements

I recognize the invaluable input of my postdoctoral supervisor, Dr. Claudia Mitchell, the wisdom of my participants, and the helpful feedback from this article's blind reviewers.

The Version of Record of this article has been published and is available at <*Gender and Education*> <July 13, 2023>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09518398.2023.2233916>

This research was funded by a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowship.

Bio: Catherine Vanner is an Assistant Professor of Educational Foundations at the University of Windsor. Her postdoctoral research project *Time to Teach About Gender-Based Violence in Canada* examined the ways in which young people learn about gender-based violence in secondary schools using an intergenerational participatory approach that is funded by a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowship and Insight Development Grant. She previously worked as a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University, and an Education Advisor for Plan International Canada and the Canadian International Development Agency. She holds a Ph.D. in Education from the University of

Ottawa and a M.A. in International Affairs from Carleton University. She lives in Windsor with her husband and two children.

Orcid ID: 0000-0002-7303-942X

Abstract

This article examines the Ontario secondary school curriculum's inclusion of opportunities to teach about gender-based violence, drawing on analysis of the *Social Sciences and Humanities, Canadian and World Issues*, and *Health and Physical Education* curricula and seven teacher interviews. Analysis applies Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis to show that opportunities for teachers to address gender-based violence issues exist, but the use of discourses that emphasize critical engagement with gender-based violence concepts are limited to upper level optional courses. Given their prevalence in Canada, gender-based violence issues should be positioned in the curriculum as essential knowledge, and taught with recognition of the gendered, racialized, and colonial influences that shape both risk and response to gender-based violence.

Keywords: curriculum; gender-based violence; Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis; Ontario; secondary school.

Following the #MeToo movement, there has been increasing recognition of the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) in Ontario and Canada, as well as calls to educate young people on GBV issues and their root causes (Canadian Women's Foundation 2020). Some types of GBV, such as domestic violence, have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Moreira and Pinto da Costa, 2020; Patel 2020), making understanding them even more pressing. This article describes openings for teaching about GBV within the Ontario secondary school curriculum. The study analyzes the curriculum's potential to raise the critical consciousness of young people to understand and address root causes of GBV. It applies Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar 2005) to illustrate the extent to which the curriculum presents opportunities and obstacles for students to understand GBV issues using critical perspectives that illuminate gender norms, relationships of power, and intersectionality as related to GBV. It examines the secondary *Social Sciences and Humanities, Canadian and World Issues, and Health and Physical Education* curricula, and seven interviews with five Ontario secondary school teachers. The literature on sexuality education in Canada and the United States indicates that GBV issues are most effectively understood when emphasizing the gendered nature of the issue, power structures and systems that influence the issue, and the intersections between gender and other forms of social marginalization and systemic violence such as racism, heterosexism, and colonialism (Haskell 2011; Ragonese, Bowman and Tolman 2017; Whitten and Sethna 2014). While GBV issues are mentioned within Ontario's Grade 9 and 10 required courses, a critical anti-oppressive approach to understanding GBV is more prominent in upper-level Grade 11 and 12 elective courses, which are less likely to be taken. Consequently, many Ontario students will not be exposed to critical perspectives of GBV through their secondary school education. A lack of understanding of GBV causes and prevention inhibits students' ability to protect themselves and others from GBV during and after adolescence. Reducing this gap through

secondary education begins with identifying opportunities and areas for growth within the existing curriculum, both of which are identified here.

Gender-Based Violence in Canada

GBV, defined here as the abuse of power over another person based on their gender identity, gender expression, or perceived gender, is prevalent in Canada, including among young people (Status of Women Canada 2018; Taylor and Peter 2011). It disproportionately affects women, girls, LGBTQ+, and gender-nonconforming people, and can refer to sexual, physical, emotional, and psychological assault or harassment that results in harm or suffering (Status of Women Canada 2018). The 2018 Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces—a key component of the Canadian Government’s *Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence*—surveyed over 43,000 Canadians across ten provinces, finding that approximately 30% of Canadian women and 8% of Canadian men have been sexually assaulted since the age of 15 (Cotter and Savage 2019). The survey also measured experiences of a wide range of types of GBV, such as unwanted physical contact, indecent exposure, and unwanted comments, and found that many of these acts were frequently experienced by Canadian women and, to a lesser degree, men. Prevalence did not vary significantly across provinces, and reflects similar global prevalence, as 35% of women globally are estimated to have sexual violence from their partner or somebody else and/or physical violence from an intimate partner (García-Moreno et al. 2013). While all Canadian women and girls are susceptible to experiencing GBV, vulnerability is dramatically higher among certain demographics. Tragically, Indigenous women and girls are six times more likely to be killed than non-Indigenous women (Miladinovic and Mulligan 2015). The term Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) refers to the phenomenon in which

Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA¹ people are disproportionately represented in acts of GBV that lead to death or disappearance and result from historic and ongoing systemic violence against Indigenous people in Canada (National Inquiry 2019). The issue has been investigated through a National Inquiry, the results of which were published in a 2019 report that classified the violence as constituting acts of genocide against First Nations, Inuit and Métis women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people. The National Inquiry and other scholarship on MMIWG highlight how GBV against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirited people emerges from centuries of colonization of the land and the bodies of Indigenous peoples, resulting in acceptance and normalization of sexual violence toward Indigenous peoples by much of the non-Indigenous Canadian population (Jacobs 2013).

Public education reaches the majority of young people; it is constitutive of society, playing a political role in determining what is considered ‘legitimate knowledge’ (Apple 2015, 307). One of the Canadian Government’s (2019) *National Strategy to Address and Prevent Gender-Based Violence* three key pillars is prevention, recognizing the importance of raising awareness about the causes and consequences of GBV, including among children and youth. Yet there is little recognition of the role of public education in contributing to this shift. The role of education is acknowledged in the National Inquiry on MMIWG report, which states: ‘We call upon all elementary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions and education authorities to educate and provide awareness to the public about missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people, and about the issues and root causes of violence they experience...’ (2019, 79). Other key concepts related to GBV prevention, such as consent, also need to be better understood by many Canadians, as

¹ Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual.

demonstrated by a survey of 1500 Canadian adults, in which only 28% were able to define sexual consent (Canadian Women's Foundation 2018). Given the need to better understand the role of education in situating the causes and consequences of GBV as a form of legitimate knowledge relevant to all Canadian students, this article analyzes opportunities for addressing GBV issues within the Ontario secondary curriculum.

Teaching about Gender-Based Violence

When GBV is present in secondary school curricula, it is usually within the sexual health curriculum (Bialystok and Wright 2019). A comprehensive sexuality education approach emphasizes access to information so that students can take responsibility for autonomous choices (McAvoy 2013), using 'an evidence-based, secular curriculum that covers sexual and physical development, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, gender and sexual diversity, sexual decision making, and healthy relationships' (Bialystok 2018, 16). Research from countries as diverse as Cambodia, Uganda, and Canada indicate that sexuality education underpinned by an emancipatory or gender-transformative framework can enhance young people's knowledge and abilities to avoid and resist GBV (Holden et al. 2015; Senn et al. 2011). A tension within sex education is balancing safety related to abuse, pregnancy, and sexual health with associating sex with pleasure and joy (Gilbert 2018; Jackson and Weatherall 2010). Curricula that address sexual consent commonly do so with an emphasis on values of individual decision-making, accountability, and responsibility. They depict safety practices as within the student's control, obscuring the constraints that many adolescents, particularly socially marginalized young people, face in accessing sexual health services (Bay-Cheng 2017). While this is considered progress in moving from a 'no-means-no' discourse (Gilbert 2018), critics of the enthusiastic consent approach suggest that it portrays an unrealistic best-case scenario as sexual decision-making is often characterized by feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty (Butler 2011) and by power imbalances based on

gender, race, socioeconomic status, and other factors that limit individuals' ability to make choices autonomously (McAvoy 2013).

Given the disproportionate risk and impact of GBV on girls who are disabled, in contact with child welfare or criminal justice, Indigenous, racialized, sexually or gender diverse, living in poverty, new to Canada, or abused as children (Crooks et al. 2019), the recognition of gender and power is considered essential for teaching about consent and GBV (Ragonese, Bowman and Tolman 2017). Bay-Cheng (2017) argues that sex education should not target sexual risk but instead tackle concepts of rights, critical literacy, ethics, anti-racism, citizenship, and collective responsibility in relation to sex and sexuality. Similarly, Bialystok and Wright observe that, to align with social justice goals, 'critical sexuality education must go beyond "comprehensive" education to anti-oppressive education that is framed by intersectional approaches' (2019, 354). Indigenous scholars in Canada advocate that education about MMIWG has to actively challenge colonial representations of Indigenous people through participatory practices that facilitate dialogue and leverage the voices of Indigenous women and girls (Brulé 2018; de Finney 2014). Education can perpetuate the status quo of existing inequalities related to gender, sexuality, race, socio-economic status, and ability, as demonstrated in ethnographic research conducted in high schools in the United States (Fields, 2008; Jackson & Weatherall 2010). Conscious attention to the social construction of gender is required for education to contribute to transforming harmful gender systems and behaviours (Baily and Holmarsdottir 2015).

Much of the literature documenting education about GBV reflects on teaching outside of the formal classroom and curriculum in extra-curricular clubs, seminars, or workshops at the secondary or tertiary level. Similar to the sex education literature, research on these programs indicates that GBV issues should be framed within the context of gender inequality and with a focus on challenging existing gender norms and broader social structures in which

violence takes place (Benoit et al. 2015; Haskell 2011; Jewkes, Flood and Lang 2014). For example, the prevention of GBV against Indigenous women and girls should be situated as part of broader colonial violence by non-Indigenous people and governments toward Indigenous peoples and communities (Crooks et al. 2019). Despite calls for social studies education to take a more active role in challenging gender inequality and heterosexism using feminist and gender discourses (Bickmore 2012; Crocco 2001), these transformative discourses remain lacking in social studies education in Canada (Fine-Meyer and Llewellyn 2018; Kitchen and Bellini 2013).

The Ontario Context

Education in Canada is decentralized and managed provincially. Ontario is Canada's most populous province, with an increasingly diverse population. In 2016, 29.3% identified as visible minorities and 2.8% as Indigenous (Statistics Canada 2017). The Ontario education system is currently in a period of upheaval. Since a Conservative government took office in 2018, it has made dramatic spending cuts in education, including a reduction in 1,558 teaching positions across Ontario in the 2019-2020 with projections to increase to over 10,000 teaching positions to be eliminated by 2023-2024 (CBC News 2019; FAO 2019). The initial cuts were concentrated in secondary schools, leading to drastic increases in class sizes (not reversed following the COVID-19 pandemic) and the elimination of many elective courses (Andrew Campbell quoted in Collaco 2019a). Another initiative of the new government was the suspension of the 2015 Primary *Health and Physical Education* curriculum after running on a platform that criticized the curriculum as 'ideological' and lacking parental consultation over 'controversial' elements such as consent, sexual orientation, and gender identity (Rodriguez, Kirby and Taylor-Vaisey 2018), despite consultations with thousands of parents during curriculum development and research showing the vast majority of Ontario parents supported the curriculum (McKay et al. 2014;

People for Education 2015). Opposition to the government's repeal of the curriculum and the cuts to teaching positions have met with vocal opposition from teachers, students, and parents. Subsequently, the government introduced a 2019 curriculum which maintains most of the 2015 curriculum's subject matter, although with some 'controversial' topics now introduced at a later stage (Jones 2019).

The 2015 Ontario *Health and Physical Education* curriculum (now adapted in the 2019 version) has been considered a solid example of comprehensive sexuality education and a significant improvement over the previous 1998 curriculum due to its inclusion of contemporary information about consent, social media, and sexually transmitted infections (Bialystok 2018; Dyer 2019). The secondary school curriculum more broadly has been criticized for representing a narrow view of predominantly white, Western, male ideologies, and perspectives at the exclusion of issues pertaining mainly to women, people of colour, and other marginalized groups. Fine-Meyer and Llewellyn's analysis of curriculum reform in Ontario from the 1960s to present concluded that women's issues have been 'squeezed into the margins of Ontario's educational learning objectives and related policy initiatives,' and that 'to support a new wave of feminist consciousness among girls and boys—young people who will march against misogyny—women's issues must be a mandatory and integral part of education' (2018, 55). Bickmore, Kaderi, and Guerra-sua note that the Ontario History and Social Studies curricula "sometimes" require students to critically examine "alternate parties" experiences of conflict' (2017, 293), including those of women and Indigenous people. Lapointe (2016) further identifies a lack of LGBTQ+ content within the curriculum, drawing on interviews with Gay-Straight Alliance members within 3 Ontario secondary schools to highlight their calls for more LGBTQ+ content in Social Studies, English, and French classes. Collectively, these studies point to the paucity of gender issues in the Ontario

curriculum and the need to increase subject matter relevant to women, LGBTQ+, and non-binary individuals.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) studies power relations embedded within language use to uncover power relationships and social inequities (Rogers 2004). Lazar observes the importance of a feminist approach to CDA (FCDA) that is purposefully ‘guided by feminist principles and insights in theorizing and analysing the seemingly innocuous yet oppressive nature of gender’ (2007, 143) with the objective of demystifying and challenging ‘discourses that continue to buttress gendered social orders in various ways, which harm and foreclose socially progressive possibilities for individuals and groups’ (Lazar 2018, 372). FCDA (Lazar 2005; 2007; 2018) includes the following characteristics : 1) Gender as an ideological structure that permeates discourse and all other social relations and activities, both in the construction of how men and women are expected to behave and in the dynamics between multiple forms of masculinity and femininity; 2) Power as a central focus of analysis, recognizing that it remains vested materially and symbolically in individual men and men as a social category, and that patriarchy interacts with other systems of power such as heteronormativity, colonialism, and neoliberalism; 3) A constitutive view of discourse that considers language as a vessel through which systems of power and dominance are maintained and reproduced and/or resisted and transformed; 4) Critical reflexivity that analyzes individual and institutional ideology and difference among women’s experiences and perspectives. It is not apolitical research but embraces biases as part of its argument; 5) Analytical activism that views gender relations as hegemonic but contestable through research and practice with emancipatory agendas; and 6) Transnationalism that attends to asymmetrical gender relations through local, contextualized analyses with awareness of wider social and discursive practices. FCDA is an appropriate framework for considering the

representation of GBV issues within curricula as its characteristics align with anti-oppressive sex education's emphasis on social justice via transformational language and pedagogy. Here, the Ontario curriculum and the ways that teachers take it up are analyzed using FCDA to illustrate the extent to which the curriculum engages students using critical perspectives that illuminate gender norms, relationships of power, and intersectional perspectives and experiences related to GBV.

Methodology

This article describes part of a larger cross-Canada study entitled *Time to Teach about Gender-Based Violence in Canada* that includes analysis of provincial curricula in Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec, interviews with 14 teachers from six provinces, three participatory student workshops in three provinces, and a participatory teacher workshop with 11 teacher participants from six provinces. The project's ultimate objective is to enhance teachers' abilities to teach about GBV issues, with recommendations and analysis grounded in the experiences and perspectives of teachers and students. In this article, I analyze the Ontario *Social Sciences and Humanities* (MoE 2013), *Canadian and World Issues* (MoE, 2015a; 2018), *Health and Physical Education* (MoE 2015b) curriculum, and seven interviews with five Ontario secondary school teachers (referred to here by the pseudonyms Lee, Heather, Erin, Kelly, and Sara) that took place January–July, 2019. My analysis focuses on the official curriculum, but is complemented by analysis of teacher interviews in which teachers speak to the curricular opportunities and obstacles they experienced in teaching about GBV. I include the interviews here to ground my curriculum analysis within the practical lived experiences of teachers, as sex education research demonstrates that teacher and student agency influences how the curriculum is taken up, at times diverting from what is prescribed in official policies (Fields, 2008). Coding was conducted using MaxQDA software and the emergent themes were framed within the characteristics of FCDA described above.

The discussion is divided according to the FCDA characteristics that emerged most prominently within my analysis, with the characteristics of gender as an ideological and constitutive structure, power as a central focus of analysis, critical reflexivity of individuals and institutions, differences among women's contexts and experiences, and analytical activism considered within what I position as overarching categories of the reproduction and resistance of systems of power and dominance.

The teacher interviews were audio-recorded, conducted by phone or Zoom, and open-ended, ranging from 30 to 70 minutes. After asking participants to describe their school's demographics, their teaching history, and their social location, I asked them to 'tell me about a time in which they taught about a GBV issue in their classroom', with follow up questions about that instance and how it compared to other times they had taught about GBV, which varied in each interview based on the story the participant told. The option of a second interview was available to all participants. Two of the Ontario teachers conducted second interviews, serving as member checks (Koelsch 2013) in which I shared emergent analysis of themes from their interview and the broader research project, asked follow up questions, and invited them to clarify, correct, and/or expand upon my interpretations. All of the Ontario secondary school teacher participants self-identified as white and female. They taught Art, English, Equity Studies, History, and Civics and Citizenship courses in both urban and rural schools.

Results

GBV issues are explicitly mentioned at all levels of the curriculum but are concentrated in Grade 11 and 12 elective *Canadian and World Issues* and *Social Studies and Humanities* courses. The only mention of GBV issues within the Grade 9 curriculum is in the required Healthy Active Living Education course. There are several isolated mentions of different GBV issues in the required Grade 10 Canadian History and Grade 10 Civics and Citizenship

courses, which most frequently address the GBV issue of MMIWG. In Grade 11 and 12 elective courses, a wider range of GBV issues are mentioned and students are encouraged to analyze them in greater depth using intersectional, critical, and anti-oppressive approaches that are largely absent in the required lower level courses.

Grade 9 Open Healthy Active Living Education

The Healthy Active Living Education course mentions and discusses multiple GBV issues, but does so with a consistent emphasis on individual responsibility and no mention of broader power structures or systemic inequalities. It emphasizes affirmative consent, clarifying that ‘both people need to say yes. Silence does not mean yes; only yes means yes. Consent needs to be ongoing throughout the sexual activity’ (MoE 2015b, 105). Framed as a discussion between a student and a teacher, the curriculum suggests that, as students make this decision, they should recognize elements that can be sources of strength, such as a respectful relationship or personal and family values, including this reference to an Indigenous knowledge perspective: ‘As a Métis woman, I was taught by my aunties about my ability to create life and how important it is to respect that gift,’ (MoE 2015b, 105). It identifies alcohol and drug use as a potential barrier to providing consent, suggesting that consent must be negotiated on an ongoing basis and cannot be provided while under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

Despite recognizing consent as ongoing and identifying some barriers to providing consent, there is a lack of recognition of the power dynamics, including social and gender norms, that can inhibit a person’s ability to provide consent. The curriculum emphasizes the importance of taking responsibility for sexual decision-making, as demonstrated in the following: ‘If you are not ready to take responsibility to protect yourself and your partner from STIs or an unintended pregnancy, you’re not ready to have sex’ (MoE 2015b, 105). The

student is portrayed as having agency and control over sexual decision-making, including the stated expectation that, through the course, the student will develop:

skills and strategies that can be used to prevent or respond to situations of verbal, physical, and social bullying and sexual harassment (e.g., gender-based violence, dating violence, domestic violence, homophobic comments, racial teasing or conflict, weight-based teasing, ostracizing behaviour, coercive behaviour, inappropriate sexual behaviour) (MoE 2015b, 107).

Under the expectation that students will learn how to prevent GBV, the curriculum returns to the language of consent, stating, ‘Staying safe in relationships and preventing and avoiding violence is a two-way street. It is critical to learn how to say no, but it is also critical to understand that no emphatically means no, that no response means no, and that anything other than enthusiastic consent means no’ (MoE 2015b, 108). The onus remains on both parties to prevent violence, suggesting that victims of violence could have prevented it through clearer communication. Similarly, regarding what can be done to challenge harassment, the curriculum suggests,

We can be role models by not using disrespectful language and not accepting it if we hear others say things that are sexist, homophobic, or racist or use other put-downs such as comments about weight or appearance. We can show our support for those who are being disrespected by standing up for them and telling their abusers to stop. If the situation doesn’t feel safe, we can help the person get out of the situation or get help (MoE 2015b, 108).

Consistently, this curriculum focuses on individual responsibility to prevent GBV, rather than acknowledging and challenging the systemic inequalities that contribute to its widespread prevalence. Unfortunately, none of the teachers interviewed had taught this course therefore observations about it in practice cannot be made here.

Grade 10 Canadian and World Issues Courses

The Grade 10 *Canadian and World Issues* curriculum contains two required courses in which some GBV issues are mentioned: Canadian History and Civics and Citizenship. The most prominently discussed in these courses is the National Inquiry on MMIWG, which is mentioned three times in the Canadian History course and once in the Civics and Citizenship course. The Canadian History course contains the expectation: ‘describe some key political developments and/or government policies that have affected Indigenous peoples in Canada since 1982 (e.g. ...the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls...’ (MoE 2018, 126; 146). While these prompts provide opportunities to talk about MMIWG, they focus on government action in relation to the National Inquiry, not the colonial policies and practices that led to the prevalence of MMIWG. MMIWG is addressed in the Civics and Citizenship curriculum when students are asked to reflect on how groups can influence government policy: ‘Why has Amnesty International been investigating missing and murdered women in Canada? Who are these women? What does this NGO hope to accomplish by drawing attention to their disappearance?’ (MoE 2018, 161). Here, the advocacy of Amnesty International is mentioned but the substantial advocacy by organizations and groups led by Indigenous women, such as the Native Women’s Association of Canada (e.g. NWAC 2013), as well as the connection between the issue and broader systemic violence and inequality, are excluded. These descriptions reinforce the status quo by positioning the Canadian government and non-Indigenous organizations as positive agents of change, while negating the colonial system’s contributions in fostering the epidemic of MMIWG and the agency of Indigenous women in bringing about the National Inquiry.

Several teachers interviewed address MMIWG when they teach Grade 10 History, but others did not consider it to be part of the Grade 10 curriculum, despite its inclusion in the documents described above. Sara described her students’ frustration that they learned about

MMIWG in Grade 11 and 12 electives but not in their Grade 10 Canadian History course. She explained that many History teachers struggle to find time to integrate the many perspectives of Canadian histories into the course, including those of Francophone Canadians, Indigenous people, and Black Canadians. Sara further explained that the course has traditionally been taught ‘in terms of conflict and battles and war... World War I, World War II... the Great Depression,’ suggesting that issues such as MMIWG are peripheral to the conflicts traditionally addressed in the curriculum.

Teachers who teach about MMIWG within Canadian History often do so thematically rather than chronologically, connecting MMIWG to a legacy of continued violence against Indigenous people. Lee describes her approach to Grade 10 History as making sure that students are ‘aware of the experience that Indigenous people in Canada throughout history and always trying to balance the story of victimization [with] the story of empowerment...’ She covers other forms of systemic violence against Indigenous people before recognizing MMIWG as an ongoing issue that ‘our country has to take a deep look at.’ Lee sees her approach as a break from how Canadian History has been conventionally taught: ‘...the approach in that course really used to be the Canadians were heroes... going out to save the world. And my approach now is much more, it’s ok for us to look at the places where our country does not have a good record and how do we practice reconciliation and how do the mistakes of the past impact and influence the way that our country is today.’ The teachers described the importance of using a more critical approach that acknowledges Canadian wrongdoing, an approach that is not explicitly present in the current curriculum documents.

Although MMIWG is mentioned in the Grade 10 courses, some teachers did not perceive it to be part of the curriculum, partly because of the vast amount of material in the curriculum overall. Teachers explained that a challenge for them to teach about GBV issues more substantively is that the Grade 10 required courses are so full of material they do not

have time to incorporate these topics, which necessitate time to properly discuss. Several teachers identified the Civics course as a natural forum to teach about GBV issues but observed that time is particularly constrained in Civics, which is only a half credit course. Heather stated, ‘I really struggle to get into any topic in the amount of detail that would actually do it justice. So, I often stay away from these topics that I consider really important like [MMIWG] because I don’t feel I can do them justice in the amount of time that I have there.’ Teachers described feeling pressured to cover vast amounts of information, leaving insufficient time to teach appropriately about highly sensitive topics such as MMIWG or other GBV issues. Thus, even when GBV issues are explicitly mentioned in the curriculum documents, they often are not addressed in class.

Grade 11 and 12 Elective Courses

Within Grade 11 and 12 courses, there are more frequent and critical references to GBV issues that examine them within the context of systems and structures of power. This is particularly true within the Grade 11 and 12 elective courses in the *Social Sciences and Humanities* curriculum, including Gender Studies, Equity and Social Justice, and Challenge and Change, that prompt students to critically examine the power dynamics and social structures that perpetuate GBV. For example, analysis of the root causes of MMIWG is prompted in Gender Studies, which asks students to analyze how power and privilege are unequally distributed between and among males and females: ‘What does the fact that more than 500 Aboriginal women are missing in Canada reveal about the position of Aboriginal women within Canada and their position in relation to Canadian women as a whole?’ (MoE 2013, 62). The Equity, Social Justice and Diversity course contains the specific expectation that students will be able to ‘demonstrate an understanding of the difference between individual and systemic forms of discrimination and oppression (e.g. ...gay bashing, racist slurs, homophobic comments’ (MoE 2013, 74) prompting an explicit analysis of

heterosexism as linked to social institutions. Several courses prompt students to take action to address these issues through a social action initiative. Both within the curriculum and in the teachers' descriptions, the social action initiatives that students undertake include some designed to raise awareness, such as campaigns in the school or community, and others designed to invoke change, such as petitions, protests, or letters to policymakers, that call for collective and systemic change.

While recognizing the scope of opportunities to teach critically about GBV that are presented by the Grade 11 and 12 courses, the accessibility of these courses, and the likelihood that students will take them, are limited. All the Grade 11 and 12 classes in which GBV is addressed are elective courses. According to teachers interviewed, these courses are more likely to be taken by female, LGBTQ+ students, and allies who are already somewhat knowledgeable about GBV. Lee, who has taught the Gender Studies course since its inception, described it as predominantly composed of female students and students already engaged in gender issues:

They're always very female dominated classes, although, over the years, we have seen more students who identify as male joining the class... the large majority of my students are there because they feel passionate about the social movement, they're engaged with the movements like the #MeToo movement... and they want to learn more.

These elective courses are often not offered and are perceived by some teachers interviewed to be more likely to be eliminated with the government's cuts to education, further diminishing their availability. These fears are validated by news reports that confirm multiple school boards had to eliminate classes and that elective courses in the social sciences were among the most affected (Alphonso, 2019; Collaco, 2019b). The Grade 11 and 12 elective courses described above provide opportunities for gendered and racialized relations of power

connected to GBV to be understood and contested, but only for the students who opt to take the courses in schools where they are available. Many Ontario secondary school students are unlikely to be exposed to these concepts through the curriculum, and opportunities are likely to decline further as teaching positions and elective courses continue to be cut.

Reproducing and Resisting Systems of Power and Dominance

The curriculum documents take two distinct approaches to teaching about GBV issues; drawing upon FCDA, these approaches are classified as reproducing and resisting systems of dominance. The former involves the negation of gender and power in relation to GBV issues, while the latter involves heightened critical reflexivity to gender and power as ideological structures influencing GBV and attention to systemic violence and the contextualized differences among groups of women and others who disproportionately experience GBV.

Reproducing Dominant GBV Discourses

The Grade 9 and 10 required courses reproduce systems of dominance in relation to GBV as GBV issues are addressed uncritically, emphasizing the individual responsibility of students to prevent them without recognizing power discrepancies related to the intersections of gender, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, poverty, or ability, and the potential impact that these factors could have on one's ability to provide consent or respond to violence. The recognition of these systems of power is considered essential within a critical and anti-oppressive approach to sex education (Bialystok and Wright 2019; Whitten and Sethna 2014). The required Grade 9 and 10 courses do not position gender as a factor influencing acts of violence, constituting, according to FCDA, a reinforcement of the dominant gendered social order and an obfuscation of socially progressive possibilities (Lazar 2007). The absence of discourses that prompt students to critically examine the causes of GBV issues, including their roots in gendered, racialized, and colonized systems of discrimination, prevents not only understanding these systems but also contesting them.

The Grade 9 and 10 curricula utilize a neoliberal approach of autonomous choice (McAvoy 2013) to portray the response and prevention of these challenges as within the realm of the student's individual responsibility, without recognizing the broader social and systemic factors such as patriarchy, heterosexism, colonialism, and structural inequality that make some individuals more vulnerable to GBV (Bay-Cheng 2017). For example, the Grade 10 courses' recognition of government policies and the advocacy of non-profits such as Amnesty International to address MMIWG, while excluding the advocacy of Indigenous women's organizations, reinforces constructions of settler innocence by denying the colonial practices that led to systemic violence against Indigenous women and obscuring the activism of Indigenous people. In this way, the text reproduces colonial systems of power through an unquestioning gaze that normalizes the construction of Indigenous women as victims and non-Indigenous actors as saviours. As Lazar (2018) notes, the normalcy of such knowledge obscures power differentials in operation. These constructions undermine students' ability to understand the ways GBV is rooted in systemic issues and to effectively challenge those structures of inequality, both in their own lives and in their future vocations. Teachers may choose to take up curriculum differently (Fields, 2008), and some described doing so with the Grade 10 History curriculum, but they note the curricular constraints that prohibit them from tackling complex GBV issues with the time and sensitivity they feel is required.

Resisting Dominant GBV Discourses

The Grade 11 and 12 curricula provide more complex and critical portrayals of GBV issues, prompting students to examine intersections between power and norms linked to race, gender, and other social constructs that serve to make certain groups more vulnerable to GBV. They embody almost all of the FCDA characteristics, including analysis of gender as an ideological structure, consideration of the reproduction of systems of power and dominance, analysis of differences among women's experiences, and activism for social

change. In contrast to the Grade 10 curriculum's coverage of MMIWG, the question about violence against Indigenous women in the Grade 11 Gender Studies course highlights differences among women's experiences and provides fodder for students to critically analyze how Indigenous women are subject to disproportionate violence as a result of racial discrimination and colonial systems. These courses initiate students opportunities to develop their understanding of gender and race as ideological structures that inform social behaviour, including GBV and responses to it, and to conduct assignments that challenge the root causes of GBV. However, these discourses are not present throughout the entire Grade 11 and 12 curricula; they are isolated to some courses within the *Social Studies and Humanities* and *Canadian and World Issues* curricula, none of which students are required to take. These courses are often unavailable and are identified by teachers as under threat from ongoing cuts to education. While critical discourses that recognize the roots of GBV issues in systems of power and discrimination exist in the Ontario curriculum, their concentration in at-risk upper level elective courses makes it likely that many students will complete secondary school without having been exposed to them.

Conclusion

This study indicates that GBV issues are present within the Ontario *Social Studies and Humanities*, *Canadian and World Issues*, and *Health and Physical Education* curricula, but that the discourses with which they are addressed differ between the required lower level courses and the optional upper level courses. References to GBV issues in the Grade 9 curriculum are focused on individual responsibility that overlooks the systemic and structural power issues that are the root causes of most GBV acts. GBV issues mentioned in the Grade 10 History and Civics and Citizenship courses are discussed uncritically, propagating ongoing power discrepancies, and the courses are so full of material that teachers may not be able to address GBV issues with the time and sensitivity needed. Grade 11 and 12 elective

courses present more nuanced understandings of GBV issues and recognize many ways that social institutions perpetuate and contribute to GBV and its intersections with other forms of power and discrimination, including racism, colonialism, and heterosexism. But because the courses in which GBV are addressed using a critical framework are optional, they are often unavailable, are under threat to become even more so, and are usually taken by students already engaged with social justice. This means that students who are uninterested in social sciences or enrolled at a school where these courses are not offered will likely complete secondary school without having been exposed to critical perspectives of the systemic and social causes of GBV. This lack of understanding can plausibly perpetuate many of the misunderstandings that surround GBV in our society, such as victim blaming and that it is not worth reporting (Benoit et al. 2015).

The ‘central concern of [FCDA] is with critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order—relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group, and disadvantage, exclude, and disempower women as a social group’ (Lazar 2007, 145). In the curriculum, critical narratives of GBV issues remain relegated to elective courses, the availability of which is increasingly threatened, reinforcing hegemonic discourses of achieved equality by suggesting students can prevent GBV simply by exercising clear communication within relationships uncomplicated by power dynamics. In this way, the privilege that enables mainly men to exert GBV—often with minimal repercussions (Johnson 2012)—remains largely unchecked by the education system. Critical recognition of the systemic practices of sexual violence that disproportionately target women and girls of colour and other racialized, special needs, and LGBTQ+ people, called for by Bay-Cheng (2017) and Whitten and Sethna (2014), are present in the elective Grade 11 and 12 courses but not in the Grade 9 and 10 required courses. While FCDA examines how power and dominance are discursively produced and reproduced, it also considers how they

are challenged and resisted (Lazar 2007). In this study, some teachers challenged the hegemonic narratives present in the curriculum, highlighting the role of teacher agency to initiate critical discussions of GBV regardless of its explicit inclusion in the curriculum. But the agency of individual teachers is insufficient to teach all Ontario students about the systemic root causes of GBV. For Ontario and other contexts where education could be a vehicle for reducing GBV, mentioning GBV issues in the curriculum is insufficient; they must be discussed in a way that facilitates critical and anti-oppressive dialogue to encourage students to challenge existing gender norms and associated power structures that perpetuate GBV.

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