

DEVELOPMENT OF SEXUALITY IN EARLY LEARNING SETTINGS

The development of sexuality in childhood in early learning settings: An exploration of Ontario
Early Childhood Educators' perceptions

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Note: This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by University of Toronto Press in the Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 30-40, available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.251-A3>

Acknowledgements: This study was funded by The University of Guelph-Humber Research Grant Fund. I would like to express my sincere thanks to research assistants, Annelise Callisto, Lyssa Keil, and Isbah Saeed, for their collective work on this project.

Abstract

This study explored Ontario Early Childhood Educators' (ECEs) experiences and perceptions about the development of sexuality during early childhood. Sixty-four educators completed an online survey with a mix of open and closed-ended questions; quantitative data were used to provide descriptive statistics and qualitative data were interpreted using thematic analysis. The findings underscore that ECEs observe typical sexual behaviours during their everyday context. These behaviours include self-touching, those occurring during bathroom routines and play-time, and behaviours influenced from family experiences. Varying perspectives about the purpose of sexual health education in early childhood emerged; ECEs suggested that knowledge of self, families, and being able to answer children's questions should be key areas on which to focus. Early Childhood Educators also discussed concerns regarding addressing childhood sexual development. Primary concerns included parental involvement, questioning the appropriateness of sexuality education in early childhood, and the need for more training. Many factors affected ECEs willingness to address the development of sexuality in their practice. When asked about workplace policies that could provide guidance, one-third of ECEs did not know if a policy existed, and a further 54% stated their workplace had no policy. These findings contribute new data on ECE perceptions about preschool sexuality education in a Canadian context. The development of curriculum and policy are suggested as ways to provide systematic guidance and protocols regarding sexual and gender development. Additional training in the area of childhood sexual development is suggested to increase ECEs' knowledge and skills in guiding healthy development.

Keywords: sexual development, child development, early childhood education, early learning, Canada

Introduction

From a holistic perspective, sexuality is understood as a complex domain of development that emerges and evolves between individuals' interactions with their environment. The World Health Organization's (WHO, 2006) definition of sexuality suggests a conceptualization of emerging sexuality in childhood as an interchange between biological, psychological, and social factors through which children experience and learn about their bodies and construct gender identities and roles. The emphasis on the social influence of emerging sexuality is the focus in this article, specifically within the context of early learning settings. Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) are an important socialization agent for children in childcare, and this study explores ECEs perceptions and experiences of the development of sexuality in childhood in their professional roles. In order to inform the current study, the following literature review explores typical sexual behaviours expressed in early childhood, existing research on ECEs perceptions of the development of sexuality in early childhood, and an examination of the Ontario context.

Literature Review

During childhood, exploration and discovery that goes beyond the simple "head and shoulders, knees and toes", emerges. Beginning in infancy, a natural discovery of all aspects of the body, including genitals, occurs. Numerous studies from the sexual abuse literature have sought to position typical and common sexual behaviours observed in childhood in comparison to atypical and worrisome sexual behaviours (Davies, Glaser, & Kossoff, 2000; Family Planning Queensland, 2012; Hornor, 2004; Sandnabba, Santtila, Wannäs, & Krook, 2003). Common sexual behaviours during early childhood include: wanting close body contact (Family Planning Queensland, 2012; Lindblad, Gustafsson, Larsson, & Lundin, 1995), genital touching (Davies et al., 2000; Family Planning Queensland, 2012; Hornor, 2004), looking at other's genitals (Davies et al., 2000; Family Planning Queensland, 2012; Lindblad et al., 1995), showing own genitals to others (Davies et al., 2000; Family Planning Queensland, 2012; Hornor, 2004), attempting to touch a woman's breasts (Davies et al., 2000; Family Planning Queensland, 2012; Hornor, 2004; Lindblad et al., 1995), playing doctor (Family Planning Queensland, 2012; Lindblad et al., 1995), and masturbation (Family Planning Queensland, 2012; Lindblad et al., 1995), amongst others (see Family Planning Queensland, 2012 for a detailed overview). As children's curiosity and exploration develop, children begin to establish sexual knowledge and attitudes, which are based upon the support (or lack thereof) and responses of parents and/or caregivers (Carroll, 2013; Hornor, 2004).

There are numerous perspectives to explain influences to the development of sexuality that acknowledge the effect of the environment (e.g., Social Learning Theory, Sexual Script Theory, Queer Theory). Throughout the environment, a dynamic weave of people and contexts that influence human sexuality exist. Children's sexuality is socialized, whereby children are active participants who are consciously evaluating, challenging, and creating personalized meanings about societal, cultural, and familial norms (Kuczynski, Marshall, & Schell, 1997). There is ample evidence in the literature on parental attitudes addressing their influence on

children's sexual development. Studies specifically geared to parental influence on early childhood sexual development include an examination of parental confidence and comfort in discussing sexuality with young children (Byers, Sears, & Weaver, 2008; Morawska, Walsh, Grabski, & Fletcher, 2015; Stone, Ingham, & Gibbins, 2013), barriers to communicating with children (Stone et al., 2013), genital labelling and gender construction (Larsson & Svedin, 2002; Martin, Baker, Torres, & Luke, 2010), masturbation (Larsson & Svedin, 2002), and answering questions about reproduction (Martin & Torres, 2014). Childcare is often a child's first departure from parental care, and is an option that many Canadian families require given that 70% of mothers with children aged 0 to 2 years and 77% of mothers with children aged 3 to 5 years work outside the home (Friendly, Halfon, Beach, & Forer, 2013). Given the amount of time Canadian children spend in childcare settings, it is important to understand ECE attitudes as they are an influence in how children begin to construct gender and sexuality.

Early Childhood Educator's Perceptions about Children's Sexuality

Several studies illustrate that ECEs commonly observe the development of sexuality in preschool settings. Studies outside of Canada assessing preschool teacher's attitudes about the development of sexuality in childhood find preschool teachers to be generally supportive of introducing sexuality education in the early years (0-6 years) (Kakavoulis, 1998; Menmuir & Kakavoulis, 1999). Larsson and Svedin's (2002) study, exploring 3-6 year old's sexual behaviours at home and in early childcare settings in Sweden, found that teachers addressed sexuality in a reactionary framework (i.e., they responded to questions that arose which included "sexually-related words, how babies are made, and differences between the sexes," p. 261), rather than initiated in dialogue about sexuality with children. This may be attributed to teachers' comfort and training regarding the development of sexuality in childhood. In Menmuir and Kakavoulis's (1999) study exploring Greek and Scottish preschool teachers' attitudes towards children's sexual development, half of the Greek, and only 14% of Scottish staff reported comfort providing sexuality education through everyday activities. The differences in comfort levels between Greek and Scottish staff can be ascribed to their training and qualifications. More specifically, in Greece, preschool education begins at 3.5 years and is included in the state education system, giving preschool educators access to more opportunities for training (Menmuir & Kakavoulis, 1999). Increasing comfort through training and education is an implication of numerous studies concerning ECE attitudes and the development of sexuality in childhood (Davies et al., 2000; Kakavoulis, 1998; Larsson & Svedin, 2002; Menmuir & Kakavoulis, 1999).

Attitudes and comfort regarding the development of sexuality in childhood may also be influenced by the belief that childhood itself is a time of innocence. Robinson (2005) suggests that the dominant view of sexuality in childhood is one of protection; children are deemed too young and innocent to understand sexuality. This view may be a contributing factor to teacher discomfort. Cohen, Byers, Sears, and Weaver's (2004) study explored New Brunswick teachers' attitudes and comfort in teaching sexual health education. They found differing attitudes between elementary and middle school teachers regarding when specific sexual health topics should be introduced to students. Cohen and colleagues (2004) discovered that, overall, middle school

teachers had more positive attitudes than elementary school teachers. The researchers concluded that “...teaching level impact on teachers’ attitudes towards sexual health education, and consequently may influence teachers’ ability and willingness to teach sexual health education” (Cohen et al., 2004, p. 13). Moreover, elementary school teachers preferred addressing the correct names for genitals in grades 4 to 5 rather than in kindergarten to grade 3. Considering the younger age of children in an elementary setting, teacher attitudes about children’s innocence may be an underlying belief resulting in decreased comfort in teaching genital terminology to younger children.

Early Childhood Educator attitudes towards the development of sexuality in childhood have also been explored within the realm of gender, which has implications towards children’s gender construction. Larsson and Svedin (2002) found daycare teachers to be more likely to name male than female genitals and, when female genitals were named, more likely to “receive an inadequate label, or colourful colloquial expressions for their genitalia” (Larsson & Svedin, 2002, p. 260). Further, Cahill and Adams’ (1997) study examining early childhood teachers’ gender role attitudes found differences amongst teachers’ personal attitudes about homosexuality, cross-gender behaviours, and stereotypical roles for girls and boys. In the interpretation of their findings, Cahill and Adams imply that, if teachers believe there are specific characteristics assigned to each sex, they are more likely to teach it, whether they are conscious of their bias or not. These findings circumstantiate the notion that the underlying dynamics of ECE attitudes concerning gender, sex, and heterosexuality have translated into behaviours that impact children’s socialization of sexuality.

The Ontario Context

The College of Early Childhood Educators is the professional, self-regulatory body for ECEs practicing in Ontario. The College focuses on the quality and standards of practice for the discipline. In order to practice as an early childhood educator and use the title “Early Childhood Educator” (ECE) or “Registered Early Childhood Educator” (RECE), individuals must apply to and maintain their membership with the College. According to the College, there are a total of 47,114 registered ECEs in Ontario: 780 male (1.7%); 46,334 female (98.3%) (Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators, personal communication, July 17th, 2015). Within the province of Ontario, ECEs work in a multitude of settings including, but not limited to: infant, toddler and preschool programs; before – and after- school programs, full-day kindergarten (FDK) and primary grade classrooms; special education and intervention programs; Ontario Early Years Centres; Head Start programs, family supports; home child care programs; parent/child/caregiver drop-in programs, paediatric playrooms and health care settings (Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators, personal communication, August 12th, 2015). Consequently, Ontario ECEs have a myriad of experience in various educational settings where they apply their expertise of early childhood development.

Whereas the College regulates the discipline, the Ontario government provides several curriculum documents to support ECEs in their work. One key document is the, *Early Learning*

for Every Child Today: A framework for Ontario early childhood settings (ELECT), (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007). The ELECT document outlines five categories of developmental domains: physical, social, emotional, communication/language, and cognitive (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007, pp. 6-7). While these domains are crucial to understanding children's development, sexual and gender development are not mentioned.

As many ECEs work in elementary school settings, with approximately 20% working in full-day kindergarten (FDK) programs in Ontario (Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators, Personal Communication, August 12th, 2015), the new Ontario health and physical education (H&PE) curriculum document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015) is important to examine. Although the new curriculum document (revised from 1998) represents gains in access to knowledge and understandings for younger children (e.g., grades 1-3), there are no guidelines within the growth and development segments to inform the development of sexuality for the kindergarten years. The importance of inclusivity for topics surrounding sexuality and gender issues must be institutionally supported by government documents, childcare administrators, and individual practitioners in order to be successfully carried out in the classroom context. A lack of curricular support may leave educators feeling uncertain and/or fearful of addressing the development of sexuality in their classrooms.

The Current Study

Although there have been several studies exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives regarding the development of sexuality during early childhood, there are no published studies that have been conducted in Canada. The primary research objective for the present study was to explore Ontario ECEs perspectives about the development of sexuality during early childhood. Specifically, the study set out to answer the following questions: What experiences do ECEs who practice in Ontario have related to the development of sexuality in early childhood? What do ECEs think the purpose of sexuality education is? Do ECEs have any concerns about addressing the development of sexuality during early childhood in their professional practice?

Methods

This study used a mixed methods approach in which data collection occurred via an online survey with closed- and open-ended questions used to explore ECE perceptions regarding childhood sexual development. The survey questionnaire was developed specifically for the purpose of this project. Following institutional ethics approval from the University of Guelph, participant recruitment occurred through two avenues: 1) A two-stage sampling procedure whereby directors of licensed child care centres in Ontario were contacted to distribute survey information to their ECE staff inviting them to participate in the research project; and, 2) A link to the online survey provided on the website of the Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators. The online survey was created using Qualtrics, an online survey provider, and was open from October 1 to December 15, 2014. Individuals considering participating in the survey

and those who completed it were invited to enter their email addresses in an incentive draw for ten \$50 cash prizes; this draw was conducted following the survey close date.

Participants

The target population for this study was Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECE) in Ontario. A total of 64 surveys were completed. The majority of the participants identified as women (95.2%), were College educated (88.9%), and lived in cities (50.8%). They averaged 40.2 years of age (range: 22-62) and 17.2 years of experience (range: 1-41). Details of participant characteristics are included in Table 1. Participants worked with children ranging in age from infants through 12 years of age: 11.1% with children under 2 years of age, 55.9% with children 2 to 5 years of age, and 33.0% with children 6 to 12 years of age.

Table 1

Characteristics of ECE Participants (N = 64)

	Count (%)	Mean (SD)
Age		40.2 (10.5)
Years of experience		17.2 (10.6)
Gender:		
Man	2 (3.2)	
Woman	60 (95.2)	
Other	1 (1.6)	
Education:		
College diploma	56 (88.9)	
Bachelor's degree	20 (31.7)	
Master's degree	4 (6.3)	
Doctoral degree	1 (1.6)	
Additional certificates	9 (14.3)	
Location:		
City	52 (50.8)	
Suburb	6 (9.5)	
Small town	18 (28.6)	
Rural	7 (11.1)	

Survey Questions & Analytic Strategy

The survey questionnaire had five parts with a total of 30 questions: 11 closed-ended, ten open-ended (i.e., text response), and nine demographic questions. The full survey is available from the study authors on request; however, data for the current study come from seven of the survey questions (in addition to the demographic details) which are organized and presented below according to the research questions in tandem with our analytic strategy.

The first research question, *What experiences do ECEs who practice in Ontario have related to the development of sexuality in early childhood?* is addressed through a thematic analysis of the open-ended survey question that asked participants to “Name some normal, everyday events which you have observed in your establishment in which children display sexual behaviour(s). Note up to five” (Menmuir & Kakavoulis, 1999).

The second research question, *What do ECEs think the purpose of sexuality education is?* is addressed through a thematic analysis of the open-ended question that asked participants “What might be the aims of sexual development and education of the child in preschool establishments? Write up to three of these aims” (Menmuir & Kakavoulis, 1999).

The third, and final, research question, *Do ECEs have any concerns about addressing the development of childhood sexuality during early childhood in their professional practice?* is addressed through a thematic analysis of the open-ended survey question that asked “Do you have any areas of concern with regards to sexuality education for children” (Ninomiya, 2010). In addition to the open-ended question, the third research question was also addressed with several closed-ended questions asking ECEs about factors (e.g., “amount of training I have had in sexual health”; “my personal comfort talking about sexuality”) that affect their willingness to address the development of sexuality in their practice right now (Cohen et al., 2004); response options included, “makes me more willing”, “has no effect”, and “makes me less willing”. Following this question, participants were provided with an open text box in which they were invited to expand on any of the factors (Cohen et al., 2004). A brief, thematic analysis of the responses to this question was conducted. A final closed-ended question to examine structural influences on ECE willingness to address childhood sexual development was included, where participants were asked “Does your school/child care centre have a policy regarding sexuality? (created by the first and second authors). Response options included “yes”, “no”, “I don’t know”, and “I choose not to answer”. If “yes” was indicated, participants had the option of filling out a text box asking for a description of the policy. Participants were given the option to expand on their responses with a text box; again, a brief, thematic analysis of these responses was conducted.

The qualitative thematic analysis of the open-ended questions was carried out using a collaborative, team-based process (Fernald & Duclos, 2005). The first and second authors provided training and supervision to a team of three student researchers. Text-based data were thematically analyzed using the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). In order to carry out this process, all members of the research team began by thoroughly reading the text responses in order to familiarize themselves with the data. Then, the student researchers began generating the initial codes led by the first author. Regular discussions and team meetings were held to keep the coding on track, to clarify coding conventions, and to discuss the main themes being identified in the data. Once the coding was completed and the themes identified, the first and second authors reviewed the themes in order to further clarify and name them. The codes and themes, which were data-driven, were then reviewed as to their adequacy in answering the research objectives, and both consistency with and ability to contribute to discipline-specific,

practice-based knowledge and the extant literature. Following this process, the report was written and reviewed by a RECE external to the research team as to their interpretability.

Results

In order to answer the overall research objective, exploring ECEs experiences and perceptions about childhood sexual development and expression, the results are presented in alignment to the three research questions. Table 2 provides an overview of the three research questions and the main themes that arose in each. Where possible, longer quotations from the participants are provided as exemplars; however, given that some of the questions asked participants to provide their answers in list form, many responses were quite brief. In these cases, multiple examples are provided to provide a richer description of the theme.

Table 2
Overview of themes

Sections within results	Themes
What experiences do ECEs who practice in Ontario have related to the development of sexuality in early childhood?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toileting • Self-touching • Play • Influence of family life
What do ECEs think the purpose of sexuality education is?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge about self • Knowledge about families • Answering children's questions
Do ECEs have any concerns about addressing the development of childhood sexuality during early childhood in their professional practice?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent involvement • What is age appropriate • Need for training
<i>Factors affecting willingness to address the development of sexuality in early childhood</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of training • Societal tensions regarding "sex ed"

What experiences do ECEs who practice in Ontario have related to the development of sexuality in early childhood?

Early Childhood Educators work with children to support development in their everyday practice; this includes the domains of sexual and gender development. The everyday context experienced by ECEs in this study related to the development of sexuality in early childhood is examined through analysis of everyday events they observe in their work. When asked about common, everyday events that they observe, ECE participants provided many examples of children displaying sexual behaviours and those related to the development of sexuality. Our analysis of their responses demonstrated that ECEs observed many sexuality-related behaviours. Four themes emerged through the analysis which included toileting, self-touching, play, and the influence of family life expressed in the child care setting. The themes are presented in their order of importance, based on the frequency of participant comments within the theme.

Toileting. This theme was reported by 48.4% of the participants. There were many observations shared by the participants of children during toileting routines. As one participant commented, “Children explore their bodies while in the bathroom, [and] children look over/comment on their peers bodies while in the bathroom”. Another participant noted that, “when older children are with a child that requires a diaper change...interest in the differences between themselves and child of the opposite sex”.

Self-touching. On their own, children exhibit self-touching, self-soothing, and masturbation behaviours in early childhood settings; 40.6% of participants observed these types of behaviours. Participants noted many examples of children engaging in these behaviours, especially during sleep times. Examples included: “self-pleasure of genitals during rest periods”, “masturbation during sleep time”, and “self-stimulating behaviours during wait times (transitions)”. These behaviours were also observed during meal times, toileting or diapering, and just general observations such as “self-sooth through genital touching”.

Play. In early childhood settings, children learn through play, exploring personal spatial limits and gender through their interactions with ECEs and peers. Examples of behaviours occurring during these interactions were mentioned by 39.0% of participants. Behaviours included children “displaying physical affection towards peers/teachers [that] might include attempts to touch a teacher's breasts”, and “attempts at investigating same gender genitalia and kissing. The last two are often attempted in a secretive location such as under a table or after building a block wall to cover a space”. The participants shared that the children began to “understand what private parts are...[and] Public vs. Private behaviour”. Some participants observed that children also developed an awareness of sex and gender development as they began to “identify body parts of boys and girls” and about differences between the sexes (as previously discussed). One participant commented that:

When children talk about their families - "he's a boy and she's a girl" are phrases that are common and children at an early age learn to label. But [they] probably don't really understand why they have labelled it that way. Same goes for "boy toys vs girl toys" and certain colours are associated with gender.

A number of the participants spoke of the children they worked with demonstrating learning about gender-based norms. One participant commented that children “asked why boy children in story books don't wear shirts when swimming and girls do”. Another participant mentioned that they observed the “exclusion of a child based on their sex (e.g., ‘only girls play dress up, no boys allowed’)”. Five participants also commented on children defying gender stereotypes in play. One such example was noted with “dress up clothes, some boys like to wear the high heels”. Furthermore, one ECE participant commented on their experience with a trans-gendered child in their class: “A desire by a biologically male child (age 4) to be considered a girl by staff (this extended well into school age, and included a desire to change into traditionally female clothing as soon as he arrived in care)”.

One participant discussed the spaces within a daycare that provide children with the opportunity to explore; they noted:

The home centre in a daycare and kindergarten classroom appears to be a natural setting for children to explore, question, try out ideas, and share stories and events. The school yard in elementary settings, children are exposed to the situations that provoke thoughts, questions, and ideas.

In particular, socio-dramatic play was noted by participants, whose observations included, “children give precise roles to each other when they are playing - you be the mom, you be the dad...mom stays home and dad works”, “pretending to be pregnant (girls and boys) and giving birth”, and “through dress up [and]...taking up roles - traditional and non-traditional”. Participants stated that children would “explore naked dolls/barbies” and “make [the] dolls kiss”. Drama centres are not the only area of the classroom where participants observed displays of sexuality. Participants noted that “book corner books about potty training and body awareness”, as well as “circle time and story time again provide events, situations, stories that provoke ideas, thoughts and questions”. Children were also observed having “conversations of a sexual nature”, “drawing pics of people with private parts”, and five participants commented that they had observed children kissing one another.

Influence of family life. The family context influences children’s emerging sexuality and this development is observed in early childhood settings, with 21.9% of participants mentioning observations that fit within this theme. One participant noted that, “I have two moms” types of conversations occur during snacks, lunches, stories, and carpet times. Children discussed what was happening in their families with their peers and teachers. Children asked questions based on their family experiences as well, including “questions of family types – i.e., whether or not a woman can marry another woman”. Three participants shared that a pregnancy or new baby in the house was an influential family experience. As one participant shared, “when children have a new baby in their family [and] the topic of where babies come from is very common”; another participant commented that they had observed children, “pretending to be pregnant (girls and boys) and giving birth”.

What do ECEs think the purpose of sexuality education is?

Three themes emerged from the thematic analysis regarding the aims of sexuality education in early childhood: knowledge about self, knowledge about families, and answering children’s questions. One participant commented on the overall approach regarding the sexuality curriculum for this age group, saying, “I imagine, it need not be 'over-thought'. Keep it simple, age appropriate, and relevant”. Another participant suggested “these goals should be established through everyday actives (e.g., washroom routine to talk about body parts). You also are not going to delve into the subject, but keep it light”.

Knowledge about self. This first theme incorporated responses around obtaining knowledge about the self, knowledge and awareness of the body, gender, as well as abuse prevention. This theme was the most strongly supported, with 70.3% of participants providing

responses within this theme. Participants felt one aim should be to ensure that “children will have a positive/healthy feeling/outlook towards themselves and their bodies” and learn “proper names in appropriate contexts” for body parts and functions. The ECE participants felt that sexuality education in early childhood settings should include: “open and honest dialogue”, “non-biased gender teachings (i.e., books, visuals, roles)”, and teach children “to be more tolerant of the differences in others”. Participants also felt that one goal of this education should be to prevent abuse. As one participant mentioned, “personal safety, appropriate and inappropriate contact, who to approach if they feel their safety is compromised”.

Knowledge about families. The second theme that arose, highlighted by 15.6% of participants, was knowledge about families, including family diversity and reproduction. ECE participants stated that one of the aims should be to ensure that children have the “foundation for openness through life”, including knowledge of family diversity. Another participant commented that children must “learn about different families, regardless of who currently attends the centre (families with 2 moms/2 dads, adopted, etc.)”. One participant shared that this education should teach, “a basic understanding of ‘where babies come from’, [that a] man and woman make a baby and it grows in the woman’s uterus”; while another participant included knowledge of “how babies grow – images of growing baby in the womb”.

Answering children’s questions. The third, and final, theme which emerged out of the thematic analysis was answering children’s questions, with 10.9% of participants providing responses in this area. The participants expressed interest in learning more about how to provide honest, and developmentally/age appropriate answers to children’s questions. One participant wanted to be able to better guide children on “what to do with their curiosity (who to ask questions to)”. Another participant noted that “ECE’s need to know what to say, when to say it, and what should be discussed with parents before any discussion with a child”. These participants wished to be better prepared to answer children’s questions. They also wanted to work collaboratively with parents. One participant stated their wish “To partner with parents and provide parent education regarding sexual development/education in preschool children”.

Do ECEs have any concerns about addressing the development of childhood sexuality during early childhood in their professional practice?

Analysis of the participants’ responses to an open-ended question asking about their concerns about addressing the development of sexuality in early childhood, saw three distinct themes of concern identified: parent involvement, determining what is age appropriate, and the need for training.

Parent involvement. The most frequent area of concern expressed by 34.4% of the participants related to parents’ “reactions and attitudes” to sexuality education for their children. One participant was concerned about having to “go against what a parent believes is suitable for their child to learn; however, I feel that it would be a great opportunity to educate parents as

well". The participants recognized how difficult it could be to meet the needs of the children while respecting the wishes of their families. One participant noted that:

Issues regarding parents are going to happen no matter how comfortable ECEs are addressing sexuality education. Many parents would be uncomfortable and question why their preschool child should be learning about sex. I have encountered many parents who do not use the correct terminology regarding body parts let alone explain how babies are made. I can see this type of education upsetting many parents.

Furthermore, ECE participants agreed that respecting each family's culture, values, and beliefs is part of engaging in an inclusive practice. They felt that addressing sexuality education in the early childhood setting would be "hard as each family has their own level of sexual education and what they think is appropriate to teach children or not. So finding the right level for each family can be tricky". Other participants commented that culture, values, and beliefs could be a barrier for both parents *and* educators, in particular for this "sensitive" topic. In addition, as one participant stated, "parents need to be involved in the teaching; therefore, discussions would need to take place in order to support the children in their understanding" while in child care and at home.

What is age appropriate. The age appropriateness of addressing sexuality education with preschool children was brought up by 12.5% of participants. As one participant commented, "the world of sexuality is very large and graphic and it is difficult to explain it in a manner that is 'gentle' for children". Another participant shared that their concerns "surround what is age appropriate for this age group and not offering too much information too soon". This apprehension about delving into certain topics in detail was shared by another participant who stated:

Children are asked to grow up way too quickly. We need to be aware of what we are teaching our children. Health class is a good time to bring up these topics but also we need not give them every detail.

There were five participants who were against any type of sexuality education. This resistance is demonstrated in the following participant comment:

I feel preschool children are MUCH too young to learn about sex! I do not think it has a place in the childcare field. Children should be allowed to be children and not exposed to all the problems that arise with sexuality and "pleasure", etc. at such an early age.

Need for training. The need for more training, emphasized by 10.9% of participants, was the final theme that emerged from the analysis. One participant noted "more training and education can never hurt". Participants were clear that training would need to be done with "great sensitivity" alongside research to determine the best, evidence-based approaches for this type of education with young children. In addition, resources would need to be provided that could be used by parents as well as the educators. Participants were concerned about providing sexuality education without this training. One participant described the challenge occurring because "sexuality is an area that embarrasses many people; so when children ask questions they tend to not answer or answer incorrect/inappropriately". Participants were asking for more clarity about

what to teach, and when to teach it. As one participant stated, “I can follow a guideline but require more training and experience”.

Factors affecting willingness to address the development of sexuality in early childhood. An additional examination of factors affecting ECEs willingness to address childhood sexuality was conducted to better understand concerns about addressing the development of sexuality in their professional practice. First, participants were asked to rate how specific factors affect their willingness to address childhood sexuality in their current practice (Table 3). A majority of ECE participants reported that answering student questions (50.8%) and the level of support from administration (50.8%) made them more willing to address sexuality. Another factor selected as increasing willingness included comfort level and reactions of children (44.4%). Participants reported that there was no effect related to either their personal comfort talking about sexuality (46.0%) or teaching topics that conflicted with their personal beliefs (65.1%). Finally, a majority of participants reported that anticipated reactions from parents made them less willing to address childhood sexuality (57.1%). Following this question, participants were given the opportunity to expand on their responses regarding willingness to address the development of sexuality in early childhood in their practice. The analysis of these open-ended responses indicated two main themes, both barriers that were noted as decreasing ECE willingness: a lack of training and societal tensions regarding “sex ed”. Following discussion of these two areas, workplace policy is also explored as a factor that can affect willingness to address the development of sexuality.

Table 3

Factors affecting ECEs willingness to address the development of childhood sexuality (%)

	More willing	No effect	Less willing
Answering student questions	50.8	30.2	19.0
Level of support from daycare/school/district administration	50.8	31.7	17.5
Comfort level & reactions of children	44.4	30.2	25.4
Personal comfort talking about sexuality	33.3	46.0	20.6
Anticipated reactions from parents	22.2	20.6	57.1
Teaching topics that conflict with personal beliefs	15.9	65.1	19.0

Lack of training. Participants clearly noted that a lack of training was a barrier to their willingness to address childhood sexuality. Whether they felt comfortable or uncomfortable with the topics, they noted that they need more training in order to “learn more information about how to deliver these sensitive topics”. One participant noted “training would ensure my approach would be timely, sensitive and appropriate”. Another ECE commented on the topic saying:

The more I see children being taught a very narrow view of sexuality, the more I want to wade in and expand the scope of education. Ignorance breeds fear, and I believe educators have a responsibility to EDUCATE, not perpetuate.

Societal tensions regarding “sex ed”. Participants were also cognizant of societal tensions regarding “sex ed” and the challenges relating to dealing with sexuality education in an early childhood context. They supported the finding regarding concerns about parental reactions, suggesting that parents would likely have “mixed reactions” or “strong reactions against it”. As one participant noted, “I would be more uncomfortable with parents than children”. Beyond parents, general societal attitudes were recognized as contributing to the challenges. One participant commented:

Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, one must consider that an ECE could understandably fear that what they say may be taken out of context and used against them in some way. Our general societal attitude of extreme division on sex education also makes one less willing to teach sex education. In the media bodies for both females and males are highly sexualized, yet our societal attitude is to not talk about it. This creates a very difficult environment for a child to know what messages to believe and what message to disregard, and our failure to address this means we have failed children in their rights to learn.

ECE participants also commented on challenges related to conflict between their belief in dealing with sexuality-related issues in their practice and their school administration. One participant shared her experience of this conflict:

I am willing to discuss sexuality on the basis of what I know, but the response in the community and the school board for whom I worked was negative. We weren't really allowed to talk about sexuality, except at its very base form (i.e., differences between boys/girls). But we did not even talk about how babies were made, or that one of our students had two moms. We couldn't even bring in literature on family differences if they included same sex parents.

Despite this conflict, a majority of the respondents were more willing to deal with the development of sexuality based on the level of support from their administration suggests that policy and guidelines are important bases for practice.

Workplace policy. When asked whether their school/child care centre has a policy regarding sexuality, one-third of participants did not know if one existed and a further 54% indicated that there was no policy. The minority of participants that had some sort of policy in place (12.7%) were asked to describe their policy. Their descriptions suggest that policies focus either on anti-bias/anti-discrimination or sexual abuse prevention. Anti-bias and anti-discrimination policies were in place to support inclusion, respect diverse communities, and eliminate bias (including sexuality and family configurations). Sexual abuse policies were commonplace and some included specific practice guidelines such as “no inappropriate touching; cannot apply sunscreen or wipe bottoms after bathroom use; cannot touch children when they need redirection”. A few ECEs reported on more specific policies such as “use of correct names

for body parts, answer questions at age appropriate level, [and to] support children's dramatic play choices re. dressing up”.

Discussion

Early Childhood Educators play a significant role in the socialization of young children in early years settings. In their professional roles, ECEs are faced with children's developing sexuality on a daily basis. The current study examined Ontario ECEs' perspectives regarding the development of sexuality in early childhood, beliefs about the purposes of sexuality education in early learning settings, and concerns about addressing sexuality in their practice.

Ontario ECEs observe children's developing sexuality during everyday events. ECEs discussed themes of toileting, self-touching, play, and the influence of family life. These findings are analogous with results in Sweden (Lindblad et al., 1995), and Greece and Scotland (Kakavoulis, 1998; Menmuir & Kakavoulis, 1999) with regards to everyday behaviours. Friedrich and Trane's (2002) conclusions in relation to toileting routines are also echoed in the present findings, as childcare is seen as a natural setting for children to observe their peers and make comments about genitals. The study findings also support previous research (e.g., Blaise, 2009; Robinson, 2005) demonstrating that children integrate and construct gender roles and behaviours through play in childcare settings.

With reference to the purpose of sexuality education in early learning settings, ECE participants reported that objectives should include children learning about themselves, and about families, while answering children's questions. Thus, similar to most pedagogy at this age, instruction in this area should be age and developmentally appropriate for children. Children should learn about themselves with emphases on body awareness/knowledge, gender, and abuse prevention. Children should also learn about families with content on family diversity and reproduction. ECEs must be responsive to children's questions with honest and developmentally appropriate answers. The participants in this study advocated for this emergent approach, but were aware that they needed professional development to be able to do this; they expressed a need for further training to prepare them to respond appropriately. The current study findings focus on learning about bodies and the differences between the sexes as the purpose of sexuality education, which reinforces Kakavoulis (1998) and Menmuir and Kakavoulis (1999)'s findings. Interestingly, the findings in Kakavoulis include “normal interpersonal relations” as a primary purpose for sexuality education in the preschool years – an element that Ontario ECEs did not address in their responses.

Despite being an everyday occurrence, ECEs can be reluctant to address sexuality in classroom settings. Many factors were reported to affect ECE willingness to address the development of sexuality in their professional practice. Notably, increased willingness was found to correspond with the level of support from administration and/or supervisors. Administrators and supervisors maintain a standard in the workplace by providing and enforcing guidelines for best practices. It may be that ECEs with supportive supervisors feel better equipped to respond to events and questions from children related to sexuality. Furthermore, having policies providing guidance on how to handle sexuality helps ECEs in deciding what to do; however, when asked

about existing workplace policies, a large majority of respondents were unaware of policies, or reported that there were no such policies in place. For the minority that did have policies in place, these focused on anti-discrimination and/or sexual abuse prevention, rather than curriculum or practice related to the development of childhood sexuality.

The willingness of ECE participants in this study was not affected by their personal comfort level or beliefs regarding the development of sexuality in childhood. The predominant reasoning for ECE's apprehension around addressing sexuality was apropos of the anticipated reactions from parents. ECEs also reported that they did not have adequate training in this area and their awareness of societal tensions regarding "sex ed" were a challenge. This factor was further supported by findings that highlighted participants' concerns about parents' attitudes and beliefs. Parental beliefs have been demonstrated as a barrier to communication with children regarding sexuality (Stone et al., 2013), and, therefore, ECEs concerns about parental attitudes are not unfounded. In light of issues with the revised health and physical education curriculum for Ontario elementary students (Ottawa-Carleton Catholic District School Board, 2015), ECEs expressed concern about how parents would respond if the curriculum were to conflict with the parents' personal beliefs. For that reason, ECEs suggested that parent education regarding the development of sexuality might be offered. Our participants were also concerned with figuring out what is age/developmentally appropriate sexuality education during early childhood, and a few were ultimately opposed to addressing sexuality in early learning settings. Many participants expressed the desire for further training to augment their professional skill development in this area. An increase in professional capacity building in sexuality education is a finding that is mirrored in numerous studies focusing on elementary, middle and secondary school teachers (Cohen, et al., 2004; McKay & Barrett, 1999; Ninomiya, 2010) and preschool teachers (Kakavoulis, 1998; Menmuir & Kakavoulis, 1999).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study explored ECE's perspectives on the development of sexuality in childhood, given the breakdown of female to male ECE professionals practicing in Ontario, there is future work that is required in regards to gender relations in Early Childhood Education. In the province of Ontario, there are only 780 registered ECEs who identify as male, or 1.7% of the Ontario ECE population (Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators, Personal Communication, July 17th, 2015). Men face challenges and barriers in the field of education, especially when dealing with issues of sexuality (Cahill & Theilheimer, 2001; Martino, 2008; Skelton, 2002, 2003). Future studies should look at the obstacles male ECEs face and how to address gender and sexuality issues from both the perspective of children and educators in Ontario.

Given the information of where ECEs work, it is assumed by the authors that the majority of the participants worked in childcare (as opposed to FDK). A limitation of this study was exclusion of a workplace question to determine how many of the ECE participants worked in childcare versus alternative settings. Research examining the differentiation between childcare and FDK settings is suggested given the estimated 20% of ECEs working in FDK programs

(Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators, Personal Communication, August 12th, 2015). Previous research has explored similarities between kindergarten and preschool programming (McGrane, 2014; Pelletier & Corter, 2005), including seamless approaches to childcare, play-based learning philosophies, and a greater focus on traditional instructional styles occurring in kindergarten programs. As childcare and kindergarten settings are moving towards a more integrated model (Pelletier & Corter, 2005), future research should uncover the unique differences between the two settings and how to effectively ensure that curriculum is implemented and guided.

Future research exploring current disciplinary training would assist with the examination and development of best practices, while ensuring that educators receive the appropriate levels of training and professional development to address topics of sexuality and gender within the classroom and childcare settings. Previous studies have examined educator preparedness in discussing issues of sexuality in the classroom (Bilinga & Mabula, 2014; Dailard, 2001; Wight & Buston, 2003), concluding that further teacher training in the realm of sexuality education is important to ensure that educators are knowledgeable and confident while addressing issues of sexuality within the classroom context. Future analysis of the preparedness of Ontario ECEs should explore current knowledge and training as well as ongoing professional development opportunities that childcare centres and school boards offer.

Finally, the incorporation of queer perspectives within the analysis of gender play amongst children would aid the field of Early Childhood Education in formulating a better comprehension of gender and sexual orientation issues in early childhood. Blaise's (2009) case study of children's constructions of sex, gender and sexuality in their performance of a popular pop song during play illustrates the influence and benefits of applying a feminist and queer perspective when addressing gender with children. Blaise discusses the importance of learning how children make meanings of gender identities by delving into children's play and asking questions, rather than dismissing children as too young to understand their mimicry, or viewing children as passive internalizers of perpetuated societal gender norms.

Conclusion

The early learning setting is an important avenue of socialization and development. As key socialization agents in children's lives, ECEs provide a safe environment to foster the healthy growth of young children in every developmental domain. Friedrich and Trane's (2002) summary of Larsson and Svedin's (2002) work concludes:

...that children acquire social and cultural roles very early in life. These rules include sexuality, and children learn at young ages that some types of behaviour are meant to occur in private settings, if at all. They learn these rules via modelling, shaping reactions from adults and others around them, as well as language used to describe behaviours as acceptable or not. Thus, children who learn how to regulate their behaviours and emotions can extend these skills to sexual behaviours. (p. 245)

The domains of sexuality and gender are missing components of early childhood curriculum, and, coupled with a paucity of policy within childcare centres, ECEs are left

unsupported in their efforts to address these domains. Knowledge of sexual development and application strategies amongst educators appear to be a choice, in that those who are interested seek further information; whereas, those who are not, will not pursue this knowledge (McKay & Barrett, 1999). On a structural level, there is the hope to standardize a sexuality curriculum, encourage childcare settings to adopt policies with regards to sexuality, and a clear need for ECEs to have proper training to address issues of gender and sexuality to ensure children receive appropriate information, and that their natural curiosities and questions are validated.

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