

Sexual Health Education in Early Childhood: Examining Early Years Frameworks Across Canada

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In this paper, the authors draw on a reconceptualist framework to explore if and how sexual health content is addressed in provincial/territorial/Indigenous early years frameworks across Canada. Specifically applying a postdevelopment lens, this study examines how principles of the Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education are present, absent, or alluded to in the early years frameworks in Canada. Findings show that explicit references to sexuality were largely absent across the frameworks, with a few notable exceptions. However, the authors illustrate openings in the current frameworks for integrating sexual health content in early years settings. The article concludes with a discussion on the opportunities for change and the theoretical shifts required in Canadian early years frameworks in efforts to ensure children's access to comprehensive sexuality education.

Key words: early childhood education, childhood innocence, gender, post-development, reconceptualist, sexuality education

Despite persisting conceptions of young children as limited or undeveloped in their sexuality, or as inherently nonsexual, sexuality is an integral part of children's identities and daily experiences (Robinson et al., 2024). Recognizing this, access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a human right protected under international human rights treaties and recognized by global bodies like the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UNESCO (Action Canada for Sexual Health & Rights, 2020). CSE is a holistic approach that involves education around the biological and physical, as well as the social and emotional, aspects of sexuality. In Canada, guidelines for sexual health education are continually revised, with the most recent iteration made available in 2019 by the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN). These guidelines call for accessible CSE for people of all ages, underscoring that receiving relevant

and accurate sexuality information is important for a person's health and well-being. Despite global and local efforts for accessible CSE, its implementation remains a controversial topic and is limited in schools (Bialystok, 2018), especially in early years settings (Balter et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2023).

The controversy of CSE in early childhood can be linked, at least in part, to the continued dominance of child development theories and logics in early childhood education and care (ECEC) field (Taylor, 2018). Developmental frameworks largely construct children and adults as distinct and opposite and assume a neutral child and a universal childhood experience whereby children are viewed as following a predetermined developmental path into adulthood as the complete and final stage of human development (Taylor, 2010, 2018). Such conceptualizations operate to characterize young children as incomplete, undeveloped, immature, unknowing, and vulnerable (Bhana, 2015; Cannella, 1997). These characterizations carry significant weight as they inform early years frameworks, curricula, and policies in limiting ways and can alter educators' perceptions of children's capabilities—especially when it pertains to sexuality education. Moreover, they legitimize the problematic discourse of childhood innocence that is rooted in romantic developmentalism (P. Ryan, 2008), thereby using innocence rhetoric to shield young children from certain topics despite social circumstances or rights. With increased awareness of the problematic idea of anything being universal in a global and diverse world, there have been shifts away from the prescribed stages of development conceived in Western culture. Even the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has changed its position statement on developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) to disrupt ages-and-stages logics, suggesting that “the notion of ‘stages’ of development has limited utility; a more helpful concept may be to think of waves of development that allow for considerable overlap without rigid boundaries” (NAEYC, 2020, p. 10). As Goffin and Wilson (2001) argue, “reliance on developmental theory to determine educational outcomes obscures the political dimensions of what is taught by implying that curriculum choices can be determined by developmental appropriateness, rather than political and moral priorities” (p. 210; see also Kessler, 1991; Lubeck, 1998). Given this, ECEC policies and frameworks, which play a role in children's access to CSE, need to better align with perspectives that move away from the limited and problematic logics of developmental theories.

Our work is situated within what has been called “postfoundational ideas” (Ninnes & Mehta, 2004, as cited in Moss, 2007, p. 231), which includes postmodern, poststructural, and postcolonial frameworks. Moss (2007) explains that a postfoundational paradigm challenges “the transparency of language,” “the rationality of humans,” and “power and knowledge” (p. 231). In relation to the aforementioned developmental theories, the term *postdevelopmental* has been used in the reconceptualist movement to revisit the limitations of developmentalism on children's opportunities to engage with diversity and identity due to problematic discourses of appropriateness or innocence. We apply a postdevelopmental lens in this article to think about the potentialities of CSE in the early years outside of normative child development frameworks.

We examined early years frameworks from across Canada to discern whether and how these documents allow opportunities for engaging with the principles of the *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education* (CGSHE; SIECCAN, 2019). Using five of the nine principles as our codebook, we analyzed the frameworks from Canada's provincial and territorial jurisdictions, as well as the Indigenous framework, for evidence of comprehensive sexual health education to establish a baseline for explicit references to CSE, to determine absences and shadows, and to conceptualize the places where there are opportunities for change. The overarching research question this study asked was: What evidence, if any, of the principles of the *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education* can be found in the current provincial, territorial, and Indigenous early years frameworks? Two sub questions were asked: (1) How do child development logics inform how CSE is taken up, if at all, in the frameworks? (2) How do child development logics inform openness, or not, toward CSE in the frameworks? In what follows we examine the opportunities and limitations for CSE in Canadian early years frameworks. Specifically, we show how explicit

attention to CSE was largely limited in the frameworks. We conclude by discussing three recommendations to better support children's access to comprehensive sexual health education in the early years.

Theoretical perspective

The dominant theories that we have been thinking with in ECEC, and how these theories have constructed images of children, have had very real implications for children's access to sexual health education and potentially harmful impacts on their overall health and well-being. Research has found, for instance, that in addition to increasing knowledge related to their sexual health, to respectful relationships, and to making informed choices, early sexuality education, especially when approached through a critical framework, can reduce gender-based bullying and harassment and expand children's views of gender, helping to challenge and counter harmful gender stereotypes early on (Hermann-Wilmarth et al., 2017; C. L. Ryan et al., 2013; WHO, 2010). This article builds on reconceptualist scholarship with a postdevelopmental lens (Blaise, 2014; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2005) to bring into question the universalizing and scientized theories and constructions of children propagated by traditional child development theories. We examine theoretical influences on Canadian early years frameworks and possible effects on daily practice and provide new frames for early education stakeholders to engage with sexuality in early childhood in affirming and nonpathologizing ways.

Reconceptualists challenge dominant beliefs about children and childhood that remain from Greek philosophers, romanticist theories, and modernist and Enlightenment discourses of the 19th centuries (Dahlberg et al., 2023; Kinkead-Clark & Escayg, 2021) that have defined ECEC (Abawi, 2021; Castner, 2021). This movement in particular has sought to disrupt the notion that there are singular "truths" about children, education, and care that early childhood educators must absorb and apply, seeking instead to bring multiple ways of thinking and living into early years pedagogies and practices (Abawi, 2021; Bloch & Swadener, 2023). This work brings into question normalizing approaches in ECEC, such as developmentally appropriate practice, that are based on assumptions of linear progression along predetermined developmental stages based on age. As Bloch and Whyte (2024) explain, such narrow developmentalist logics and practices limit the possibilities for recognizing and engaging with diversities in early childhood. Rather than following a predetermined guide, reconceptualist perspectives honour listening to children and embracing coconstructed curricula that emerge from children's abilities, interests, and curiosities (Rinaldi, 2006). Doing so requires recognizing the limitations of developmentalist constructions of children and childhood and the ways in which they operate to silence sexuality in young children's lives.

Many reconceptualists have moved toward postdevelopmental theories to both critique the universalizing, ethnocentric, and cisheteronormative logics of modernist child development theories while also examining the effects and productions of child development theories in normative images of children, educators, care, and education (Taylor, 2018). As Blaise (2014) conceptualizes it, postdevelopmentalism is not an outright rejection of children's development but an umbrella term that creates space for alternative theories for understanding children and childhood that go beyond—and outside of—traditional child development theories. Blaise (2014) explains that

post-developmentalism does not deny children's development, so much as complicate and interrogate it. It is a move away from relying solely on developmental discourse to understand gender. It intentionally makes room for other perspectives that are useful for illuminating aspects of children's subjectivity (Blaise 2014b). (p. 319)

Many of the postdevelopmental theories are informed by poststructural and reconceptualist scholarship from the 1980s and 1990s (Cannella, 1997, 2005; Katz, 1999; Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Lubeck, 1994, 1998; Silin, 1995) and

complement other critical frameworks, such as queer theory (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Such critiques are important for considering how open conversations with children about gender and sexuality have been traditionally deemed inappropriate through developmental frameworks such as DAP, while developmental psychology, as a discipline, has reinforced gender essentialism, heteronormativity, and pathologized expressions of gender diversity and sexuality in young children and childhood (Blaise & Taylor, 2012).

Importantly, postdevelopmental theorizations have been important for disrupting dominant discourses of childhood innocence that, as Taylor (2010) argues, are perpetuated by and legitimized through child development. When it comes to sexuality, Taylor (2010) explains that ages-and-stages logic reinforces the view that sexuality in early childhood is limited and simple and thus is something that naturally emerges later on in people's lives. Such views have harmful implications for young children's overall health and well-being, such as limited access to accurate information needed to navigate the physical, emotional, and social aspects of their sexual realities and experiences (WHO, 2010). As Taylor (2010) explains, "The emphasis on children's unfolding sexuality, rather than on their sexual presence (or being), makes it difficult to conceive of children's sexual agency in the here and now and to acknowledge that they might have desires of their own" (p. 53). Postdevelopmentalism thus disrupts the ways that the concept of childhood innocence is used to reinforce heteronormativity by suggesting it is inappropriate to discuss sexuality with young children due to a lack of development while simultaneously assuming that children are inherently asexual, cisgender, and heterosexual. Silin (2013) explains that "stage theories lead adults to underestimate what children could understand about the world and overestimate their need for protection from 'difficult' knowledge—including knowledge of gay people" (p. 16). While discourse surrounding childhood innocence may perpetuate the idea that sexuality is inappropriate to discuss with young children, the literature has been indicating for decades how children regularly play within and across gender and sexual identities (Bailey, 1993; Blaise, 2005; Chen, 2009; B. Davies, 1989; C. Davies & Robinson, 2010; Gallas, 1998; Renold, 2006; Taylor & Richardson, 2005; Walkerdine, 1990; Wohlwend, 2009). The task is therefore to equip early childhood educators to better affirm children's sexuality explorations and realities, rather than to deny that they occur at all.

Literature review

The kinds of documents that support young learners differ, as may interpretations around what is considered curriculum versus a framework. Langford (2012) made a distinction between curriculum and curriculum frameworks, noting that the OECD (2004) "recommends that a curriculum framework should be flexible so that well-trained early childhood educators can adapt it to the level of the individual program while still being consistent with the broad vision, beliefs, values and principles" (p. 210). Curriculum, however, establishes expectations for public education goals as opposed to broad guidelines for early learning. For the purposes of this study, we explored documents that featured educational programming, without set outcomes, and thus refer to the documents as curriculum frameworks. We also recognize that the frameworks examined in this study were not written as sexuality education frameworks, and we did not approach them as though they were.

In both curriculum and curriculum frameworks, the integration of sexual health content in early years education is still left to a marginal status, at best, and is mostly silenced and unacknowledged (Balter et al., 2021; A. W. Davies et al., 2023; Robinson & Davies, 2017). Very few published works are available—whether peer-reviewed or otherwise—that attend to how to openly integrate sexuality content in early years pedagogies (Bobier & Martin, 2015). Moreover, dominant constructions of children as necessarily vulnerable and naive and childhood as necessarily a time of innocence (Robinson, 2013) deem sexuality a topic that could disrupt the "innocence" of childhood, thereby classifying sexuality education as inappropriate within ECEC (Balter et al., 2021; Ponzetti, 2015). Thus, sexuality education in the early years is often politicized in a manner that marks it as contentious to

openly discuss with young children and/or parents and families (A. W. Davies et al., 2023).

In 2017, Malins examined provincially established kindergarten curricula produced by ministries of education (or the equivalent) for the ways gender and sexuality were discussed. She found that the vagueness of the language around the inclusion of gender and sexual identities could impact enacted curriculum as educators can choose which identities to include based on personal comfort or values, and thus advocated for more explicit curricular expectations that name who and what to include and how. Malins stressed the importance of this in relation to children's rights and citizenship, especially in Canada. Many of the curriculum documents included in the 2017 study have since been revised.

Several scholars have reviewed early learning frameworks in Canada over the years. Jacobs and Adrien (2012), for instance, explored Canadian early learning frameworks for language around inclusive education. Langford (2012) also conducted a review of Canadian provincial frameworks, with special attention given to how the frameworks address the issue of diversity. McCuaig (2014), similar to the findings by Langford (2012), reported how the frameworks included priorities for family and community relations, a respect for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and a program driven by play (p. 1). None of these documents were explored explicitly for sexual health or gender inclusive content in early childhood. Furthermore, some of the frameworks included in these reviews have also since been updated. The lack of curricular guidance for sexuality education led to our exploration of early years frameworks across Canada, and ongoing review is needed given evolving updates to curricula, curriculum frameworks, and policies.

Methods

The research team compiled all provincial and territorial early years curriculum frameworks from each jurisdictional website. As a bounded case study, we limited the data to early years curriculum frameworks outside of the K–12 school system; we found an early years framework for each province, as well as an Indigenous framework that applies everywhere in Canada. The Northwest Territories had its own framework, which was included in the data collection; however, neither Yukon nor Nunavut had their own territorial framework. Some provinces, notably New Brunswick and Ontario, had supplementary curriculum or policy documents that were included on their provincial websites alongside primary curriculum frameworks which were included in the data collection and analysis. The Newfoundland and Labrador framework referred to four additional companion guides, but these guides were not publicly available during data collection in 2023 and are therefore not part of the data set.

Each provincial and territorial framework had identical content in both the English and French versions, with the exception of New Brunswick. In addition to being the only officially bilingual province in Canada, New Brunswick held the distinction of being the only province to have commissioned two entirely different early learning frameworks: one in English and one in French. The content of these frameworks differed considerably such that there is no single New Brunswick framework; rather, there is New Brunswick—English and New Brunswick—French. Similar to the Québec framework, a member of the research team coded the New Brunswick—French document in the original French and then translated the data to English for this article. Unlike all of the other frameworks in this data set that generally consisted of a single document, the New Brunswick—French framework existed as a collection of 22 separate PDFs. This is reflected in Table 1.

All of the frameworks stated that they were designed for early learners under the age of 5 or before kindergarten entry, apart from Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador, which were described as being for children aged 0–8, or even older if those children were in regulated care settings. Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador's frameworks were not divided into sections by age, however, so the frameworks were coded in their

entirety. Manitoba and Saskatchewan each had two separate frameworks: one for infants and toddlers and another for preschoolers. As both documents pertained to children under 5, both the infant/toddler and the preschooler frameworks were included in data collection. A total of 43 documents met the inclusion criteria, with a combined total of 2,494 pages analyzed for this study.

Table 1: Early Years Curriculum Frameworks by Province/Territory

Curriculum Frameworks by Province/ Territory (43 documents in total)	Ministry	Total Number of Pages
Indigenous	Government of Canada—Employment and Social Development	26
British Columbia (2019)	Ministry of Education and Child Care	112
Northwest Territories	Ministries of Health and Social Services, and Education, Culture, and Employment	82
Alberta (2014)	Ministry of Education	153
Saskatchewan Infants (2010, reprinted 2021)	Ministry of Education	29
Saskatchewan Preschool (2008, reprinted 2021)	Ministry of Education	75
Manitoba (Infants)	Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Learning	29
Manitoba (Preschool)	Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Learning	24
Ontario Early Years Policy Framework (2013)	Ministry of Education	20
Ontario How Does Learning Happen (2014)	Ministry of Education	52
Québec (2019)	Ministère de la famille	196
New Brunswick—English (2008)	Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Development	220
New Brunswick—English professional support documents (6 documents; publication dates range from 2008 to 2019)	Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Development	350
Nouveau-Brunswick—French (22 separate documents; publication dates range from 2010 to 2011)	Ministère d'Éducation et développement de la petite enfance	783
Nova Scotia (2018)	Department of Education and Early Childhood Development	88

Prince Edward Island (2011)	Department of Education and Early Years	191
Newfoundland and Labrador (2019)	Department of Education—Early Learning and Child Development Division	64

Data was coded by employing five of the nine principles of the *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education* (CGSHE; SIECCAN, 2019) as our codebook. Given that principles 1, 3, and 8 were found to be not applicable to this study and the data connecting to principle 9 focused on professional development more broadly, we focused our analysis on principles 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7 (see Table 2). Though not written for early childhood specifically, the CGSHE is nonetheless the evidence-based benchmark through which comprehensive sexual health education is designed and evaluated in Canada. Using the CGHSE principles as our codebook also opens future research possibilities for comparing how comprehensive sexual health education is approached both inside and outside the K–12 school system and across different age groups. The CGSHE was first released in 1994, with subsequent updates made in 2003, 2008, and 2019. It is important to note that all of the early learning frameworks comprising this data set were published after 2003, which means that the CGSHE existed in the public domain while the early years frameworks were being written.

The research team recognizes that the early years curriculum frameworks in the data set were designed to encompass all educational programming in the early years; they were not written as sexuality education curricula and were not approached as though they were. The authors of this article chose to approach the documents with compassionate curiosity, looking for both explicit examples of the five relevant CGSHE principles and, as was often the case, implicit references where the seeds, or opportunities, for comprehensive sexuality education could be “read in” to the documents. Table 2 outlines how the CGSHE principles were employed as a codebook for sexuality education in the early years frameworks. (Those relevant to this study are in bold font.)

Table 2: The Nine Principles of Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education

Principle	Application to Early Years Frameworks
1. “Is Accessible (is accessible to all people inclusive of age, race, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, STI status, geographic location, socio-economic status, cultural or religious background, ability, or housing status (e.g., those who are incarcerated, homeless, or living in care facilities)” (p. 23)	N/A As the early years frameworks are used in all licensed care and home settings within each jurisdiction, this principle was not applicable to this study.
2. “Promotes Human Rights (promotes human rights including autonomous decision-making and respect for the rights of others)” (p. 24)	Explicit references to children learning about their own rights, respecting the rights of others (including conflict resolution), references to children being able to make their own choices, and respecting the choices of others were included in this principle. Taken together, the data from this principle was understood as teaching either explicitly or implicitly or about consent across contexts (i.e., not just sexual consent).

<p>3. “Evidence Based (is scientifically accurate and uses evidence-based teaching methods)” (p. 24)</p>	<p>N/A</p> <p>No unique data points were discovered under this principle, and it is not applicable to this study. Any references to educators seeking out or using evidence-based approaches were subsumed under principle 9.</p>
<p>4. “Broadly Based (is broadly based in scope and depth and addresses a range of topics relevant to sexual health and well-being)” (p. 25)</p>	<p>Explicit references to bodies and naming body parts were included in this principle.</p>
<p>5. “LGBTQ Inclusive (is inclusive of the identities and lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, Two-Spirit, nonbinary, and asexual people (LGBTQI2SNA+) and other emerging identities)” (p. 25)</p>	<p>Explicit references to the LGBTQ+ community were included in this principle, as well as implicit openings for LGBTQ+ people or themes to be “read in” to the documents, such as “welcoming diverse families” or “welcoming all children.”</p>
<p>6. Addresses Gender (promotes gender equality and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence)” (p. 26)</p>	<p>Explicit references to gender were included in this principle.</p>
<p>7. Balances Positive and Negative (incorporates a balanced approach to sexual health promotion that includes the positive aspects of sexuality and relationships as well as the prevention of outcomes that can have a negative impact on sexual health and well-being” (p. 27)</p>	<p>Explicit references to joy, pleasure, and delight were included in this principle, especially where they related to finding joy in one’s body and in relationships with others.</p>
<p>8. Responsive to Emerging Issues (is responsive to and incorporates emerging issues related to sexual health and well-being” (p. 27)</p>	<p>N/A</p> <p>No unique data points were discovered under this principle, and it is not applicable to this study.</p>
<p>9. Professional Development For Educators (is provided by educators who have the knowledge and skills to deliver comprehensive sexual health education and who receive administrative support to undertake this work” (p. 28)</p>	<p>Explicit references to educator professional development and implicit support for educators’ curiosity and willingness to seek and share new ideas for professional practice were included in this principle.</p>

Findings

Analysis of the ways in which the five CGSHE principles were addressed across Canada’s early years frameworks revealed two overarching patterns. First, explicit references to sexuality-related matters were few and far between. When direct mentions of sexuality were made, they were largely limited and/or simply part of a “laundry list” of elements for attending to diversity and inclusion. Moreover, when elaborated on, they were usually narrow in their conceptualizations, if not inaccurate. This was particularly the case with principles 5 (LGBTQ+ inclusive) and 6 (addresses gender). However, it is important to mention that New Brunswick’s (English), Nova Scotia’s, and British Columbia’s frameworks did attend to principles 5 and 6 in meaningful ways. Second, it was common to find implicit references to sexuality-related matters and ones that reflected the five CGSHE principles. Here, we mean that while sexuality was not explicitly addressed or named, “seeds” were evident in relation to the principles, offering potential to engage with young children in sexuality-related matters. This was particularly the case with principles 2 (promotes human rights) and 7 (balances positive and negative). Attention to principle 4 (is broadly based) seemed to tether both patterns, where sexuality-related topics were explicitly mentioned, but they were not framed explicitly as sexuality education. Given these findings, below we discuss each code in greater detail, illustrating that while sexuality-related matters are largely not explicitly addressed in these frameworks, at least not in comprehensive and critical ways, the frameworks do offer opportunities and possibilities for their inclusion. In doing so, we also illustrate the effects of developmental logics on the ways in which sexuality is addressed, or not, in early years frameworks.

Table 3: Summary of Findings

	BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	QC	NB (EN)	NB (FR)	NS	PEI	NL	NT	ME	IND
Principle 1 (is accessible)														
Principle 2 (promotes human rights)*	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		
Principle 3 (evidence based)					x							x		
Principle 4 (is broadly based)*		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		
Principle 5 (LGBTQ+ inclusive)*	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x
Principle 6 (addresses gender)*	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x

Principle 7 (balances positive and negative)*		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		
Principle 8 (emerging issues)	X						X							
Principle 9 (professional development)					X		X		X	X		X		

Principle 2: Promotes human rights

Found in all jurisdictions except for New Brunswick (French)

Principle 2 of the CGSHE emphasizes education around sexual and reproductive health with the aim of fostering autonomous decision making and respect for the rights of others. Common codes that emerged across the frameworks in relation to this principle, though without direct references to sexuality, included *choices*, *children’s voices*, and *autonomy*. Instead, our analysis found that attention to matters related to human rights was broad and largely centered around developmental goals. For instance, the Ontario framework stated, “[Children] are increasingly aware of and able to make healthy choices to meet their basic needs (e.g., for food, sleep, physical activity, self-care)” (p. 32) and reminded educators that “asking for and considering children’s ideas in joint dialogue can help to strengthen their sense of autonomy, their competence, and their critical thinking skills” (p. 41). Similarly, the Québec framework mentioned the importance of “functional autonomy (handwashing, getting dressed, etc.)” (p. 150). Newfoundland and Labrador’s framework emphasized equality and underscored “allow[ing] children to have a voice in making the rules and routines in their daily lives” (p. 44).

While no direct mention of sexuality was found, the attention to human rights within these frameworks may still open up opportunities for educators to make links to sexuality. In this way, these frameworks may provide seeds to address this sexual health principle. Promoting children’s choice making and the importance of respecting others’ choices, even though not explicitly related to sexuality, is nonetheless important foundational work for engaging children in critical reflections and actions around sexuality-related matters such as consent. However, it is important to note that no explicit mention of sexuality in relation to human rights may also run the risk of missed opportunities for making direct links to sexuality-related matters in day-to-day practices, or doing so in limited ways. The lack of attention to sexuality may in turn propagate the problematic view that sexuality-related matters are nonexistent or limited in early childhood and subsequently irrelevant to young children.

Principle 4: Broadly based

Found in all jurisdictions except for British Columbia and Manitoba

Sexual health education at any age should be broadly based in scope and depth and address a range of topics relevant to sexual health and well-being. While a broadly based sexuality education was not evident across the frameworks in this study, as with principle 2 of the CGSHE, openings for explicit sexual health education in relation to principle 4 were evident. This was particularly the case with two sexuality-related topics: bodies and safety. Although attention to bodies and safety was not framed in terms of sexuality education, the topics were

given substantial attention across 10 frameworks, though it was often limited in scope and depth.

Content around bodies largely revolved around functional practices. For instance, Québec's framework noted the importance of "knowing the names of body parts" (p. 108), Nova Scotia's framework addressed "hygiene practices" (p. 60), and Newfoundland and Labrador's framework addressed "proper nutrition" (p. 26). Similarly, Alberta's framework highlighted "whole body explorations" (p. 46), Saskatchewan's framework addressed "body awareness" (p. 46), and New Brunswick's (English) framework included "human touch" (p. 124). Safety-related matters were also directly addressed in 9 of the 10 frameworks noted above. For instance, one of the goals in Newfoundland and Labrador's framework was dedicated to "well-being and belonging" (p. 25) and emphasized children's health, safety, and security; this goal was also evident across the other frameworks.

While bodies and safety were not taken up as sexual health topics, including content around bodies and safety, even if limited, may create opportunities for educators to address these topics in relation to sexuality, such as providing an opening for educators to address sexual violence. However, the lack of explicit connections to sexual health and well-being, again, also runs the risk of missed opportunities for comprehensive sexuality education around bodies and safety. Moreover, the lack of breadth and depth of these topics may operate to oversimplify teaching and learning around bodies and safety and may result in providing children with "simple facts" about bodies and safety.

Principle 7: Balance the positive and negative

Found in all jurisdictions except for British Columbia and New Brunswick (French)

Good-quality sexual health education should both address the positive aspects of sexuality and promote the prevention of negative outcomes. Although explicit attention to offering a balanced approach around sexuality education was not evident across the frameworks, nine of the frameworks did offer implicit opportunities for incorporating a positive outlook regarding sexuality in early childhood. Many of the frameworks we examined emphasized a positive outlook in terms of conceptualizations of children and childhood. While we do not wish to romanticize childhood and childhood experiences as always positive, these positive discourses can support young children's positive engagements with sexuality. Common codes that emerged across these frameworks included *joy*, *delight*, and *pleasure*, among other related terms. For instance, in the New Brunswick (English) framework, educators were prompted by the reflection question "In what ways does your centre build upon dispositions of optimism, joy, and a zest for living and learning?" (p. 82). In the Ontario *How Does Learning Happen* framework (2014), educators were asked to consider "what brings a child joy" (p. 18). These discourses and prompts may offer opportunities for educators to apply a positive framework to sexuality-related discussions in their settings. However, as with the principles mentioned above, the lack of explicit connections to sexuality in relation to joy, pleasure, and delight runs the risk of missed opportunities for explicitly engaging with sexuality and doing so in positive terms.

Principle 5: LGBTQ+ inclusive

Found in all jurisdictions except for Manitoba and Northwest Territories

Traditional sex education programs in schools have been criticized for being exclusionary, leaving out the experiences and lived realities of people who are not part of the dominant culture. Our analysis of the early years frameworks in this study revealed that reference to the LGBTQ+ community was evident in 11 frameworks, six of which made explicit reference to LGBTQ+ people and five which did so implicitly. Nova Scotia's framework was particularly noteworthy as it included a section dedicated to gender diversity, stating "as our understanding of

gender evolves, it is important that educators create early learning environments that are gender inclusive, and that they avoid making gender-based assumptions about children and how they play” (p. 31). It also addressed gender diversity in the definitions section, stating that “gender is usually conceptualized as a binary (girl/woman, and boy/man), yet there is considerable diversity in how individuals and groups understand, experience, and express it (Canadian Institutes of Health Research 2015)” (p. 77). British Columbia’s framework also made meaningful and explicit mentions of LGBTQ+ people. For instance, in the section “Early Years Spaces Are Inclusive” and in the glossary, attention was paid to diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions (pp. 20–21 and p. 102). The framework also outlined critically reflective questions in the “Identities, Social Responsibility, and Diversity” and “Well-Being and Belonging” sections that directly recognized gender diversity (e.g., see pp. 72, 88). British Columbia was also the only province to mention transgender people directly. The following questions appear in “Pathways for Engaging with Wellbeing and Belonging”:

- “How might I pay attention to responses as children play with or transgress gender norms and share new ideas with colleagues and with children?”
- What are my assumptions of transgender children? Transgender adults?” (p. 72)

Explicitly naming both transgender children and adults could give educators confidence to purposefully include picture books about trans people or characters, support children’s transgressions of gender norms in play, and be proactive in welcoming and including families with trans members (such as a parent transitioning, a nonbinary sibling, etc.)

New Brunswick’s (English) framework also explicitly mentioned queer families and people several times. In the section “Play and Playfulness,” for instance, sample narratives of children’s interactions during play included an example of play that has “two mommies” (p. 112). In its 2011 framework “Our Youngest Children,” it mentioned “families with two dads” (p. 13), and its 2010 framework “Diversity and Social Responsibility” highlighted the importance of inclusive language when it comes to families. It stated, “Remember that we can intentionally choose to use inclusive language; for example, terms like guardian/family instead of parent/mom/dad” (p. 63). Moreover, the Indigenous framework had a section dedicated to “gender and family diversity” with explicit mention of Two-Spirit people and the harmful effects of colonization on these communities specifically (p. 2). Québec’s English-translated framework acknowledged “different types of families” (p. 71), the importance of play materials that reflect “diverse family structures” (p. 42), and the need for “openness to and respect for diverse family” (p. 43), though explicit mention of queer families was limited to just one example: “Of course you can make two cards. One for each daddy” (p. 171).

Other frameworks included explicit reference to queerness, but they were largely limited to a laundry list of elements for attending to diversity and inclusion. For instance, in Newfoundland and Labrador’s framework, gender, sexual orientation, and sexual identity were explicitly addressed in a list in the “Diversity” section (p. 44) and in the glossary of terms, including being mentioned in the definitions for “diversity” (p. 53) and “inclusion” (p. 55). This pattern was also evident in the framework for Alberta, which stated, “All children, regardless of race, religion, age, linguistic heritage, social and economic status, gender, or ability are entitled to inclusion in everyday activities and routines” (p. 111). While the frameworks for Saskatchewan and Ontario highlighted the importance of diversity and inclusion, there were no explicit references to LGBTQ+ people. Similarly, in the Prince Edward Island framework, gender identity and sexual orientation did not make the list for inclusion: “Inclusion[,] in early years centres[,] embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family regardless of ability, race, culture, language, religion, family structure, or social/economic circumstances” (p. 31).

It is important to note that while meaningful and explicit attention to this principle was evident in several of the frameworks we examined, though less explicitly in others, our analysis showed several instances of narrow conceptualizations of sex, gender, and sexual orientation where discussions were framed in heteronormative and binary gender terms. For instance, the Québec English-translated framework used a “boys and girls” structure when addressing gender: “A young child’s social identity is determined by the extent to which they see themselves as part of various groups: a family, an ECS group, boys or girls, etc.” (p. 158). This finding may be traced to the common assumption that child development logics legitimize that young children are necessarily and naturally cisgendered and heterosexual (Robinson & Jones-Díaz, 2016). While openings for educators to include queer people and LGBTQ+-related content were evident in 11 of the curriculum frameworks, for the most part there were few direct mentions of queerness or examples of how to explicitly take up LGBTQ+ content in the early years classroom.

Principle 6: Gender equality and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence

Found in all jurisdictions except for Manitoba and Nova Scotia

Good-quality sexual health education should address problematic gender norms, roles, and stereotypes that fuel gender inequalities and sexual and gender-based violence. Attention to gender was evident in 11 frameworks, with several making explicit reference to gender equality, though the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence was largely not addressed. New Brunswick’s (English) framework was particularly noteworthy in relation to gender equality. For instance, in the section “Inclusiveness and Equity,” a sample narrative around in/equitable practices between children included “Bonnie (4 years) enters the block corner and Paul (4 years) says, ‘You can’t come in here we are playing Ninjas.’ Bonnie replies, ‘Girls can be Ninjas too,’ and begins to play” (p. 162). In the Alberta framework, attention was paid to the potential for unintentional gender-differentiated interactions between educator and students: “In this sample narrative, the educator may not recognize that she could be responding to boys differently than girls when they are upset” (p. 42). Québec’s English-translated framework also made explicit references to gender equality, with emphasis on the importance of deconstructing gender stereotypes. Several mentions were made of planning for neutral and flexible environments, with specific attention to “choos[ing] gender-neutral toys and supplies” (p. 161). The section “Gender Stereotypes: Obstacles to Deconstruct” highlighted that “stereotypes accentuate the differences between genders and impose gender-based limitations on what a person should be able to do or think” and invited educators to “assign tasks and responsibilities without regard for traditional roles,” among other advice for ensuring gender-inclusive and gender-equitable classrooms (p. 161). British Columbia’s framework also brought attention to gender stereotypes, providing practitioners with “critically reflective questions” such as “What are my assumptions about girls and boys?” (p. 72).

Similar to principle 5 of the CGSHE, however, our analysis showed instances of narrow conceptualizations of gender where gender was framed in stereotypical and binary terms. The New Brunswick (French) framework, for instance, spoke of gender in binary terms and assumed essentialist views of what it means to be a girl and a boy:

Girls prefer fairy-tale books or stories that describe characters and the relationships between them.
Boys prefer non-fiction, or lavishly illustrated books that show how to assemble or measure, or how things work, or nature documentaries, or adventure books featuring their favorite superhero. (p. 28, translated)

Moreover, references to gender equality, while well intended, tended to encourage a simple “reversal” of traditional gender roles, such as “girls can be ninjas too,” as seen in the excerpt outlined at the start of this section. Doing so without engaging children in critical analysis of traditional gender roles does not necessarily ensure gender

equality. This is especially important to consider since it is often the case that girls are encouraged to engage with boy-coded materials and activities, whereas boys are rarely encouraged to engage with girl-coded materials and activities (Lyttleton-Smith & Robinson, 2019).

Regarding sexual and gender-based violence specifically, the Northwest Territories and Indigenous frameworks were the only frameworks to give attention to the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence. Though less directly, the Northwest Territories framework made several mentions of family violence and the importance of wraparound support. The Indigenous framework was more explicit, referring to “murdered and missing Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirited people” and stating, “The safety and well-being of children is directly linked to the safety and security of women” (p. 22).

Similar to principle 5 of the CGSHE, other frameworks did explicitly mention gender; however, attention to gender was largely limited to an item on their laundry lists. For instance, gender was explicitly addressed in the “Equality” section of Newfoundland and Labrador’s framework, which stated, “Inclusion means truly accepting that we are all members of humanity. It dismisses the concept of ‘us and them,’ accepting all races, genders, abilities, religions, and socio-economic factors” (p. 44). Limiting attention to gender to a laundry list may propagate the oversimplification of young children’s gendered realities and experiences and may reinforce assumptions that gender is irrelevant in early childhood.

Discussion

Our analysis of the provincial, territorial, and Indigenous early years frameworks across Canada revealed that explicit attention to sexual health was mostly limited. However, implicit opportunities for addressing sexuality in early childhood were found. While the explicit and implicit references to sexual health that were found are a start and may encourage some educators to integrate meaningful sexuality education in their settings, the overall lack of explicit, direct, and comprehensive attention to early childhood sexuality may result in oversimplified or entirely unaddressed sexuality education in the early years. This may have harmful implications for children’s overall health and well-being, such as lack of accurate and complete information needed to make informed decisions in their daily lives. In this section, we discuss three recommendations toward improving early childhood sexuality education.

Our first recommendation is for a theoretical shift across early years frameworks in Canada that moves away from narrow, and potentially harmful, assumptions of young children as inherently asexual or as “undeveloped” in their sexuality toward conceptualizations of young children as possessing sexualities and genders across the spectrum and deserving comprehensive information on bodies, consent, identities, families, and other related sexuality topics. Specifically, we call for theoretical shifts, grounded in the reconceptualist paradigm, that incorporate the values of postdevelopmentalism to guide the development and implementation of Canadian early years frameworks. The lack of attention to sexuality in the frameworks examined suggests that sexuality-related matters, and thus sexuality education, is largely viewed as either irrelevant in early childhood or developmentally inappropriate or both. These assumptions and views could reasonably impact enacted curriculum around sexual health education in early childhood in ways that limit children’s access to comprehensive sexuality education. Reconceptualizing and interrupting dominant images of children as innocent, inherently asexual, too young, and cognitively not ready for sexuality education and, instead, viewing sexuality as an existing and ongoing part of young children’s lives may enable more expansive conceptualizations of children and childhood that allow for sexuality education that goes beyond basic and simple facts about bodies and safety. Such theoretical reorientations across early years frameworks must reconsider the aims, theories, and practices of ECEC through a critical lens, emphasizing its

potential to be a site for social transformation and change toward more socially just societies (Blaise, 2014; Silin, 2013).

Our second recommendation is for more frequent revisions of early years frameworks that are informed by current research in the field of ECEC to better equip preservice and in-service educators to deliver meaningful and good-quality programming with young children. While shifts away from relying exclusively on traditional child development logics have been in motion, as noted earlier in this paper, such redefining must also occur across early years frameworks to meaningfully attend to evolving societal responsibilities, identities, and families (Malins, 2023). Many of the frameworks in this study were outdated by decades, with few jurisdictions that included revised and updated complementary documents with which educators could work. Revisions of early years frameworks should also entail ensuring that they are kept current with the principles of CGSHE.

Our third recommendation is for more explicit content on sexuality within Canadian early years frameworks. Doing so would include explicitly naming sexuality as a critical component of children's holistic development, as suggested by Balter et al. (2021). Implicit and vague references to sexuality could limit how sexuality is addressed in enacted curricula, if it is addressed at all. For instance, as Malins (2017) argues, the limited inclusion of gender and sexual identities in early years curriculum frameworks may mean that educators can choose which identities to include based on personal comfort or values, potentially leaving out the experiences and lived realities of marginalized communities such as LGBTQ+ people. Consequently, enacted curricula may not only be limited in scope but may also operate to make certain communities invisible. Specifically, we recommend an *integrated*, rather than siloed, inclusion of explicit reference to sexuality whereby childhood sexuality is not simply limited to one section of a framework but weaved through and interconnected across all facets. With changes like these at the policy level, educators may feel better equipped and supported, enabling greater potential for the implementation of more comprehensive early childhood sexuality education programming.

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined current provincial, territorial, and Indigenous early years frameworks across Canada. Drawing on postdevelopmental perspectives from reconceptualist scholarship, we analyzed whether and how these documents allowed for opportunities to engage with the principles of the *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education* (SIECCAN, 2019). Using five of the nine principles as our codebook, our analysis found that attention to childhood sexuality education was largely limited and when explicit references to sexuality were made, they were usually part of a laundry list of elements for attending to diversity and inclusion. In cases where sexuality was elaborated on, conceptualizations of sexuality were usually narrow, if not inaccurate. While a few frameworks did attend to sexuality in meaningful ways, reference to sexuality was typically siloed into a section of the framework. While all the frameworks offered opportunities to engage with sexuality through implicit references that reflected CGSHE principles, the lack of explicit attention to sexuality runs the risk of missed opportunities for making direct links to sexuality-related matters in day-to-day practices, or doing so in limited ways. Given these findings, we offered three recommendations to better support young children's access to comprehensive sexual health education and educators in its implementation. These included the need for a theoretical shift in Canadian early years frameworks, more frequent revisions of the frameworks to better reflect changing societies, and more explicit and integrated sexuality content.

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